

AKBAR

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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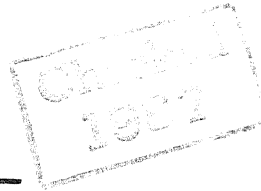
*Humayun*, 1978



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# Akbar

MUNI LAL



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TO MY GRANDFATHER

*"On thee is my trust"*

## Preface

This is the third book of the series. The Life-story of Babar was published in 1977, and that of Humayun a year later. These two biographies were aimed at discovering for the layman, the composition of the charisma which enveloped the founders of the Mughal Empire. The present study is similarly motivated. The broad intention is to focus on such traits of Akbar's personality as give him the right to be classed among the great monarchs of the world.

This does not mean that the book is a compendium of Akbar's virtues only. Kingship and sainthood do not ordinarily mix; this was specially so in medieval times when cold-hearted acquisitive ambitions ran riot, and compelled the rulers to abandon considerations of humanity. The sword was then the only dependable means to keep the egotistic, unpatriotic self-seekers at bay. Challenges from outside could also be met effectively only by a relentless show of strength. Further, Akbar made war an end by itself, and the glory of conquest the surest means to maintain stability. It is, therefore, not surprising that, like his predecessors, Akbar too built pyramids of human heads and staged grim massacres. But there was a difference; both Babar and Humayun regarded bloodshed as amoral; Akbar, on the other hand, went down on his knees following an orgy of butchery. He was invariably penitent, and sought forgiveness for the pain and misery caused.

Though Akbar's deviations from the path of the saints were many, he inwardly yearned to be one. *Din-i-illahi* was a bold experiment in his quest for truth. His failure was a victory for the researcher in him. Similarly, his other foibles not only revealed but were an essential part of the dynamic in his makeup. Hence his lapses, shortfalls and excesses are as pertinent to this study as his successes and acts of beneficence. Together, the minuses and pluses of his long career make a whole transcending division. His claim to greatness rests on the totality of his personality.

I am well aware of the shortcomings of this work. In self-defence, I can only say that this is more a study of Akbar than of his reign. Only such events and developments as directly throw light on some part of his character have been discussed at some length; the rest have either been skipped or mentioned only briefly to preserve continuity. An attempt has been made to achieve the limited purpose of this book with the presentation of what I considered to be essentials. Else, the reality might have been lost in the maze of comparatively irrelevant details. Akbar's life is too vast a subject to be dealt in a single volume.

Akbar's New Order was a revolutionary concept; it generated apprehensions and fears in the minds of orthodox Muslims. A happy by-product of this dissatisfaction was that the history of his reign came to be written from sympathetic and also from critical angles. The critics did a useful service in that their accusations helped neutralize, to some extent, the sustained sycophancy of the court historians. Abul Fazl equated Akbar with God, and injected an element of divinity in whatever the Emperor said or did. On the other hand, Abul Qadir Badaouni and others of his ilk regarded Akbar as a carbon copy of the devil himself; they charged him with profanities unequalled in the annals of Islam, and thus gave him a content of fallibility and this-worldliness. The truth, of course, lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is, therefore, not an easy exercise to arrive at a reasonably accurate assessment of Akbar as a reformer and a warrior.

Jesuit missionaries, especially Fathers Jerome Xavier and Monserrate compounded their hopes, wishes and frustrations into stories which are at times not only self-contradictory but patently untrue. These were apparently written with a view to please their masters in Goa and Portugal. They exaggerated the hazards of their mission, and thus won praise for their much-acclaimed devotion to the cause of Christianity. Akbar kept them guessing till the very end, and so incurred their wrath and hostility. It is surprising that, aware of this backdrop of their secret despatches, historians like Vincent A. Smith should place complete reliance on their versions and depict Akbar often as an apostate, a near-monster and a liar.

The fact seems to be that in Akbar the missionaries found one who was more than their match in the fine art of saying no with a yes. Akbar knew their intent; he also never lost sight of his own

which in all probability was to liquidate Portuguese hegemony on the west coast. Both played for time. Neither won. Had he been spared for a few more years, Akbar might have succeeded in realizing his inward, unexpressed wish to push the Portuguese back into the sea. It seems his adventure in the south had more to it than met the eye. Salim's revolt upset his plans. This is a surmise which may or may not be true. What is intended to be stressed is that the confidential reports of the missionaries cannot be relied upon for an assessment of Akbar's mind and motives. Other primary sources on which a major portion of this book is based are *Tabqat-i-Akbari* by Bakshi Nizam-ud-Din, *Twarikh-i-Farishta* by Muhammad Qasim Farishta, *Twarikh* by Sujjan Rai, *Waqiat-i-Asad* by Asad Beg, *Sadar Nama* by Abdul Latif and *Tuzk-i-Jehangiri*.

All these works are of considerable historical importance. Taken together, they reveal abundantly not only the character and personality of Akbar; they also give credible accounts of the changes that took place in the minds of men during the half century of Akbar's reign. Besides, they bring out with fair accuracy the significance of the unity that Akbar sought to bring about through his religious and administrative reforms. These works came useful in the task of synthesizing Akbar's virtues and failings into a composite whole.

However, the legend which is Akbar can perhaps be captured best by listening to the folk-songs and stories about his loves and liberalities current to this day in the villages of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Bards, not unoften, become ecstatic when telling the life-story of the great Padshah. A feeling is inescapable that it is in these popular improvisations that the real Akbar—sensitive, benevolent, kind-hearted and God-fearing—is to be found. Exaggeration, no doubt, is a part of hero-worship; these renderings in verse and prose are nevertheless a clear testimony to the esteem in which Akbar was held by those whose burdens he strove to lighten throughout his life. This folklore is more than history; it epitomizes soulful commentaries on the ideals Akbar cherished. Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad died nearly four hundred years ago, but Akbar will live forever. In the spring or when the rains come, the village maidens offer in dance and melody rich tribute to this hero of olden times, "our Vikramaditya who loves all and speaks not an angry word either in hate or malevolence." Here is the great Mughal that enthalls.

It gives me pleasure to record my gratitude to the Director and staff of the Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, for their assistance and unfailing courtesy. But for their helping hand, it might have taken considerably longer to complete this work. My thanks are due also to the Directors of the National Museum, New Delhi and Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta. They made available photographic copies of miniatures and portraits reproduced in the book.

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## Birth and Infancy

Akbar was the son of the soil he ruled over for forty-nine years, eight months and three days. He was born on Sunday, 15 October 1542, at Amarkot, a small town of less than five thousand inhabitants amidst the forbidding sand-hills of the eastern extremity of the Sind desert. The adjoining sea of sand in Rajputana provided a bleak backdrop for the birth of a child destined to rank among the great sovereigns of the world. This was not the first time that Providence chose a grim setting to raise the curtain for an important event in history.

In *Tazkrat-ul-Waqiat* Jauhar states that Akbar was born at the time of the full moon on Thursday, 23 November (Shaban 14). To commemorate the day, Humayun gave the prince the name Badr-ud-Din (Full Moon of Religion). The eponym Akbar was added in reverence to Ali Akbar, father of Hamida Banu Begum. It was in 1546, after the conquest of Kabul, that on the advice of the court astrologers the official birthday of the prince was declared to be Sunday, 15 October (Rajab 5). This necessitated a change of name as well. Badr (full moon) became a misfit. The new name chosen was Jalal-ud-Din (Splendour of Religion). The eponym Akbar remained intact. All historians, including Abul Fazl, have ignored Jauhar's version and cite 15 October as the date of Akbar's birth. Vincent A. Smith is perhaps the only exception. He considers 23 November to be more authentic.

Humayun and his 15-year old consort, Hamida Banu Begum, had reached Amarkot on 22 August 1542, following a perilous

march from near Jodhpur through a tract of desert as forbidding in its scarcities as in the hostility of its Rathor ruler, Rana Maldeo. It was indeed a wonder that the fleeing Mughal Emperor and his small band of followers escaped death or capture at the hands of one whom Muhammad Qasim Farishta described as "the most powerful and influential prince of the time in Hindustan." Ambition led Maldeo to forget the traditions of chivalry associated with the house of Rana Sangram Singh. His promises of support and asylum to Humayun were mere snares to entice him to Jodhpur and then hand him over to Sher Shah at a price. Timely warning by a Rana's courtier, who was once in the service of the Mughals at Agra, saved the fugitives from falling into the trap.

Humayun and his panic-stricken entourage were then left with no alternative but to accept the invitation of Rana Virsal Prasad to make Amarkot the base for gaining a foothold in Sind. Hopelessness bred in Humayun and his men a desperation which enabled them to win the battle against hunger, thirst and the raiding parties of pitiless pursuers. Humayun and Hamida Banu entered Amarkot at the head of a weary troupe of seven attendants; the rest straggled in several hours later in small batches. The gallant Rana not only gave the royal couple a gracious welcome; he received every member of the Mughal party with courtesy and made suitable arrangements for their stay and entertainment. For occupation by Humayun and his young wife he vacated his own palace inside the fort, and ordered his courtiers to do them homage in the manner done to their own sovereign.

When the Rana came to know that Hamida was seven months with child, he placed at the disposal of his guests the meagre medical resources of his desert kingdom. Rajput ladies of high status were deputed to keep her company and to see that the memories of her arduous trek through the desert did not in any way disturb her equanimity. In a signed circular to his officers, the Rana wrote:

We have the privilege of playing the host to a royal Mughal couple. Fortune has not been kind to them in recent months. It is our moral obligation to make them feel at home in our realm and to leave nothing undone to restore their peace of mind. Therefore, I command you all, in the name of our traditions and canons of honour, to extend to them such courteous submissions

as would bring them happiness. A special obligation devolves upon the ladies of your families to personally pay their homage and express their good wishes to the Queen who is expected to gain in a few weeks the high honour of being a mother. We attach great importance to the coming happy event. It will perhaps be the first time in history that a Muslim princess will give birth to a child in a Rajput palace. Our duty is clear. The young Queen must be accorded the same courtesies and facilities as would be extended to a daughter of our own royal family. Arrangements may therefore be made, in consultation with the custodian of our household, to fill the days of our honoured guest with amusements such as would raise her spirits and generate in her the confidence of being amidst genuine friends.

This was a circular which, in a way, anticipated the concept of unity the unborn child was destined to work for. Humayun was touched greatly by the warmth of deferential submissions made to him and his wife. The Rana placed at his disposal the entire resources of his small kingdom, including an army comprising 2,500 well-trained Rajput soldiers, for joint punitive action first against Shah Hussain Beg Arghun of Sind and then, if the fortune favoured them, against Sher Shah Sur whom they considered to be the arch-usurper and a common foe.

This alliance, like all military pacts, was rooted in mutual self-interest. Rana Prasad longed for an opportunity to avenge the murder of his father by Shah Hussain, and Humayun was in desperate need of a friend who would lend him a hand for the reconquest of a lost kingdom. For seven weeks, Humayun discussed with his host the various aspects of the joint expedition, and then, at the instance of a Hindu astrologer, decided all of a sudden to march to Jun, seventy-five miles south-west of Amarkot, without waiting for the any-day-now birth of Hamida's child. He had been told by the wandering holy man that if he did not set his eyes on the child for thirty days after his birth, the new-born would bring good fortune to him and the Timurid dynasty. Superstitious by nature, Humayun left Amarkot on 12 October 1542, in disregard of the counsels of his *amirs*. Three days later Akbar was born.

Abul Fazl embellishes the story of Akbar's birth with ingenious phrases and word-pictures of extreme delicacy:

The emergence of the light of fortune from the sublime veil and consecrated curtain of Her Highness, cupola of chastity, occurred when the altitude of the Lesser Dog-Star was  $38^{\circ}$  and when eight hours and 20 minutes had passed from the beginning of the night\* of Sunday, 5th Rajab, lunar era, corresponding to 6th Kartak, 1599, Hindu era. The place was the auspicious city of Amarkot which lies in altitude  $25^{\circ}\text{N}$  and latitude  $105^{\circ}\text{E}$  of the Fortune Isles.

Among the strange circumstances which occurred near the time of the appearance of the light of fortune, there was this—that before the auspicious moment, the mother felt a pressing urgency to bring forth the child. Maulana Chand, the astrologer who, by the king's order, had been stationed by the chaste threshold in order that he might cast the horoscope, was perturbed, as the moment was inauspicious. 'In a short time, a glorious moment will arrive such as does not happen once in a thousand years. What an advantage if the birth could be delayed.' Those who were present made light of it, and said, 'What good can come out of your agitation? Such things are out of human control.'

At this very instant, the impulse to bring forth the baby passed off, and the astrologer's mind was set at rest somewhat by the transit of the unlucky moment. The ostensible cause of this supreme blessing was that a country midwife had just been brought in to perform the office and, as her appearance was repulsive, the holy soul of Mariam Makani (Hamida Banu) felt disgusted and her even temper was ruffled and so the urgency for parturition left her. But when the chosen time came, the Maulana became disturbed lest it should accidentally pass by. The confidants of the haram said to him, 'Her Majesty has, after much suffering, got a spell of relief and is now slumbering peacefully. It would not be right to awaken her. Whatever the Almighty God, in His pleasure, has determined must happen.' Just as they were speaking, the pains of travail came upon Her Majesty Mariam Makani and awoke her and in that auspicious moment the unique pearl of the viceregency of God came forth in his glory.

\*In the Persian system of astrological calculations, the night started from the moment of the setting of the sun.

The birth of a male child was a signal for festivities the like of which had seldom before been seen in Amarkot. The fortress, enveloped in the light of the full moon, became the focal point of rejoicings which, as is customary in the Orient, initially took the form of prayers to thank the Lord of Creation for bestowing upon the royal guests the gift of a son and heir. Drums were beaten to proclaim the happy event to the population. When the dawn broke, alms were distributed to the poor. Community kitchens were set up and food served free to merry-makers and all those who came to the town to take part in the celebrations. Temple bells were sounded, and nymph-like dancers, clad in their shimmering red and yellow raiment, went into ecstatic performance of their skills before the images of deities worshipped for their sway over the forces of procreation.

Inside the palace, the bunch of Mughal ladies congratulated each other on an event they all believed was of uncommon significance. Traysful of sweets were passed around, and tables heaped with luscious fruits were laid out for the members of the King's household to feast upon. Merry-making continued for two days and nights without a stop. Khwaje Muazzam, brother of Hamida Banu, received the felicitations of Rajput courtiers on behalf of Humayun, and bestowed upon them *khilats* and robes of honour suited to their ranks. The Khwaja sent hard-riding horsemen to convey the news to the Emperor who was camped sixteen miles from Amarkot at a picturesque place abounding in water and vegetation. When Tardi Beg broke the news to him, Humayun prostrated himself on the ground to thank the Allah for His munificence. The assembled courtiers did the same. Some of them ventured to suggest that Emperor return to Amarkot to share with Hamida Banu the joy of parenthood, but in vain. Humayun was determined to evade having a look at his son for thirty days. The pronouncement of the wandering sadhu obsessed him. The fond vision of a glorious future for the Timurid dynasty kept him steadfast in his decision. "It may be unlucky to retrace our steps," he told his counsellors.

The Mughal tradition demanded that the birth of a son and heir be celebrated in high-key to the accompaniment of what Abul Fazl calls "the opening of the floodgates of generosity," but Humayun resisted the temptation of staging a hallelujah at this stage. The customary festivities, he felt, could be held only after

the 30-day waiting period was over. However, the news was too joyful to be left alone without an expression of thankfulness to the Almighty. The Emperor ordered one of his aides, Jauhar, to bring a pod of musk entrusted to his care for safekeeping. When brought to him, Humayun broke open the container on a China platter. He then distributed with his own hand the contents among the assembled *amirs* with the words: "Circumstances do not permit to be more lavish. I restrict myself to presenting to you this token gift in the hope that the fame of the infant prince would spread throughout the world like the fragrance which fills the air of this tent." Everybody appreciated the gesture. Then they all prayed for long life of the prince. A feast was held in the evening, at which function musicians and nautch-girls and jesters combined their skills to produce an atmosphere in which the travails of the past were forgotten and the participants looked to the future with hope and confidence.

The next morning, the allied force, numbering nearly three thousand, continued its march to Jun. The going was smoother than expected. No opposition worth the name was offered by Shah Hussain's men guarding the north-west of the Rann of Kutch and areas close to the eastern arm of the Indus. Moreover, Humayun's army gained strength as it progressed, its ranks swelling not only by the addition of straggling remnants of the once mighty Mughal force but also through several Hindu chieftains making a common cause with Rana Prasad against the Sind ruler. It was, therefore, little wonder that the Governor of Jun fled in panic, and the district fell to Humayun without resistance. This success convinced the Emperor that his days of homelessness were gradually coming to an end and that the prediction of the Hindu astrologer would ultimately come true.

Jun, with its gardens and wide open spaces, fascinated Humayun; it was a well-composed district, abounding in all the essentials that make life pleasurable; its picturesque setting and heady freshness of air reminded Humayun of his favourite Rohri gardens, and he decided to halt there for a period of rest and enjoyment before deciding on the next step in the campaign to reconquer the lost empire. The royal tents were pitched at a distance of two miles from the township, and soon the camp began to pulsate with the Mughal modes of pleasure-making. Music, wine and dancing helped create an atmosphere of relaxed cheerfulness that swelled the

Emperor's heart. He sent Shams-ud-Din Khan, the gallant Afghan who saved his life at Qanauj, to escort Hamida Banu Begum and the infant prince to Jun. His heart was yearning to see the newborn who, he believed firmly, was destined to be an instrument for the revival of Mughal fortunes. When in a few days the royal litters carrying the Begum and her son approached Jun, the Emperor went out a distance of five miles to greet them. Humayun held the prince in his long, lanky arms thirty-three days after his birth. Hamida, radiant with the glow of motherhood, was delighted at the reunion. The camp and its surroundings charmed her. A scion of the venerable Khwaja Ahmad of Jam, she expressed her happiness by staging a round of prayer meetings, invoking the blessings of the All-Merciful Allah upon the house of Timut. Though young in years, Hamida's faith in the influence of supernatural powers on human affairs was deep-rooted. One was touched to find her absorbed in the reading of the Holy Quran while a majority of the inmates of the camp were engaged in celebrating the occasion at a lower level of placating their senses. Humayun shared the mood of his spouse, and did homage to God by distribution of alms on a scale not known in Jun before. The poor were fed on Mughal dainties for eleven days at a stretch, at the end of which period a festive function was held to give the prince what Humayun considered to be his pre-ordained name: Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar.

It was in the trouble-infested days of 1540 at Lahore that an old man dressed in green with a staff in his hand bade Humayun in a dream not to lose heart, and told him that he would soon have a son who he should name Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar. The old man, when Humayun asked him about his identity, said that he was Khwaja Ahmad of Jam, and that the child would be of his own lineage. Bibi Ganwaran was then pregnant, and it was thought that she would probably have a son, but she bore a daughter, Bakshi Banu. When a year later, Humayun married Hamida Banu, daughter of Shaikh Ali Akbar Jami, at Pat in Sind, the dream gathered significance. She gave birth to the promised son two years and four months after the prediction. It was, therefore, considered proper that Humayun should give the prince the name chosen by the Shaikh.

The christening ceremony, an elaborate affair complete with all the frills and feathers of a royal function, was presided over by

Shaikh Ali of Shiraz, an eminent divine respected widely in the Muslim world for his piety and knowledge. The first clothes of infant Akbar were fashioned from the garments worn by the Shaikh.

The ceremony, which lasted till past the mid-day prayer hour, was attended, among others, by Rana Prasad and his retinue of Rajput courtiers. Costly presents were given to the prince by all those who came to felicitate the Emperor, among whom was a tribal Hindu chieftain whose gift of a dagger with a gold handle studded with diamonds was offered with these words:

This is a family heirloom of great antiquity. While entrusting it to your charge, o'prince of princes, I pray that the Lord may give you the strength not only to safeguard the honour of the house of Babar Padshah but also to protect the interests of all those who may happen to come under your sway. Our astrologers predict for you, o' lustre of the eye of Humayun, a long and prosperous reign equal in glamour to the majestic authority of Alexandar and Asoka. Keep this dagger in safe custody; its sheen will protect you and your family from the evil eye, and its sharp edge will serve as a shield against the wicked designs of your enemies.

Humayun thanked the chieftain for his sentiments, and said that he would keep the dagger in his personal charge for as long as he lived. The prediction that a bright future awaited Akbar sparked within Humayun a desire to commission the best known astrologers in the Orient to prepare the prince's horoscope. Astronomers of the court of Rana Prasad had already made studies of the positions of the planets and their satellites at the time of Akbar's birth, and all of them were unanimous that seldom before had a child been born in more propitious circumstances. Humayun deputed two of his most talented specialists in star-lore—Maulana Chand and Maluana Ilyas—to draw the horoscope of the prince. Their tabulations and conclusions were more or less similar. They agreed with the Hindu astrologers that all the celestial luck-bringers were ranged on the side of Akbar, and that his reign would mark the acme of Mughal glory.

Another horoscope was made in later years by Pandit Jotik Rai, an eminent astrologer of Akbar's court. It was drawn many



years after Akbar came to the throne, and after some of the predictions recorded by Maulanas Chand and Ilyas had already come true. A Shirazi astrologer, Maulana Fatehullah, who came to Agra in 1583, was commissioned by Akbar to study the *shastras* and prepare a chart of his destiny by coordinating the Hindu and Muslim systems of astronomy. It was a challenging assignment; the Maulana worked assiduously for many years to prepare a horoscope that the know-alls of the age admired for its scientific depth. Akbar was pleased. According to Abul Fazl "it reconciled the differences in the other three horoscopes and came very near to reflecting accurately the will of the Creator." But it must not be forgotten that Fatehullah had the advantage of using his hind-sight to read what had already become past history.

Abul Fazl devotes several chapters to analyze and interpret the four horoscopes—a highly abstruse discussion which cannot but be a despair of the lay reader. One, however, is amazed at the vastness of the historian's knowledge of astronomy and other allied sciences.

During the celebrations, considerable spotlight was turned on the bevy of Akbar's nurses headed by Maham Anaga, wife of Nadim Khan Kokaltash and mother of Adham Khan.\* On the seventh day of festivities, Humayun held a special function to honour them by presentation of gifts and dresses of honour. Maham, a lady of considerable learning and charm of manners, thanked the Emperor for the honour done to her and her colleagues:

Your Majesty, may the great Allah protect your sacred self till eternity. We, your lowly servants, are touched beyond words at the honour done to us. In entrusting the care and upbringing of the scion of the family of saints to us, Your Majesty has reposed rare confidence in our loyalty. We are beholden to you, sire, for this trust. We pray that the Almighty enables us to discharge our duties with love and devotion. We make a solemn pledge to serve with our lives the one whom we consider to be a glorious gift of heaven to the dynasty of Babar Padshah. We shall protect him with our lives. This is a vow we take in full awareness of the dangers that lie ahead. With this solemn promise, we rededicate ourselves humbly to the service of Your Majesty.

\*Some historians have suggested that Adam Khan was a royal bastard.

Maham's soulful words were echoed by Jiji Anaga, wife of Shamsuddin Muhammad who saved Humayun's life following the Mughal debacle against Sher Shah's Afghan army at Qanauj. She made almost prophetic references to the hidden purposes of the Creator, and expressed her conviction that the child born in the wilderness of Amarkot was destined to be a "paragon of peace and purity." A picture of fidelity and love, she won the hearts of everyone present by her professions of unswerving loyalty to the house of Amir Timur. The honour of being the foster-mother of a "royal prince more resplendent than the lantern of the wall of worship," she said, could not be described adequately in words. "My hands go up in thankfulness for bestowing upon me a distinction without equal. A woman could not have wished for a more self-rewarding service."

Maham was not a wet nurse. Jiji was. Her son, Aziz Koka, was only slightly younger than Akbar. Abul Fazl gives a list of women who suckled the infant prince. Hamida Banu breast-fed her son for the first few days, and then the "honour of satiating the hunger of the Prince of Fortune" fell in that order to Daya Bhawal, Fakhr-un-Nisa (wife of the Nuruddin Koka), Hakima, Jiji Anaga, Bibi Rupa, Khadar Anaga and Pija-Jan Anaga.

The name of Maham does not appear in this list. She was perhaps only a superintendent of the wet nurses. It was at the breast of Bibi Rupa that Akbar tasted Hindu milk. All other nurses were Muslim.

Many renowned literary persons from Sind and also from beyond the Hindukush joined Humayun's service at Jun. They were in search of patronage at the court of a royal dynasty famous for its beneficence and appreciation of academic skills. To write chronograms in verse or crisp prose was a popular literary art of the age. Dates of important events were summed up in short, succinct phrases suited to the occasion. Birth of a male child in a royal house invariably generated a competition among the court poets to catch the sovereign's eye with the magic of their word-play. Many a fanciful composition was submitted to Humayun,\* but the one that impressed him most was by a young poet from Badakhshan who equated Akbar with *aftab* (the Sun). The

\*The chronogram prepared by Maulana Nuruddin Tarkhan—"Shahansha Jahangir"—has been mentioned by Abul Fazl to be of special significance.

numerical value of each word of this chronogram totalled 223. What struck Humayun most was that the digits of the figure 223 totalled seven—a number considered sacred in the Persian system of astronomy. The Badakhshani scholar was loaded with honours and rich gifts. Humayun became convinced that a fortune as bright as the Sun awaited his son.

The round of festivities crippled Humayun's will to wage a war. He was not a high hearted hedonist of the Babar brand. Preferring not to go headlong in search of sensuous pleasure, he would wait for suitable opportunities to assuage his animal passions. Jun, with its gardens and wealth of natural beauty, presented one such opportunity, and Humayun seized it with both hands. For seven long months, he shut himself up in the privacy of his seraglio, blissfully oblivious of the storm that was gathering both inside and outside his camp. Rana Prasad, yearning to wreak vengeance on Shah Hussain for the murder of his father, was restive at the Mughal preoccupation with bodily enjoyment. His representations to Humayun for quick action evoked no response. On the contrary, the Emperor and his advisers mistook the Rana's impatience to be a manoeuvre to land them in the mire of a prolonged warfare. Shah Hussain, a clever tactician in the art of creating disaffection in the ranks of his enemies, was known to have sent secret communications to the Rana, urging him to forsake Humayun in return for extensive territorial concessions. Tardi Beg, arrogant and irascible, openly accused Prasad of complicity with the Shah, and threatened to liquidate his followers by force if he did not acquiesce in the plans of the Mughal generals. Stung to the quick, the proud Rajput made a complaint to the Emperor, but the latter was too preoccupied with wine and women to pay heed to the remonstrance. This proved to be the proverbial last straw that broke the alliance. The Rana returned to Amarkot in a huff with all his five thousand followers. "It is no use trying to make friends with the Mughals," he declared in a stinging rebuke to his allies.

As a result of this mass defection, the situation became perilous for Humayun. With a resourceful enemy in front and a disenchanted erstwhile ally in the rear, the Mughals found themselves isolated. Alone, they were not strong enough to launch a frontal attack on Bhakkar. The vast stretches of a menacing desert all

around brought Humayun face to face with a grim reality. The date with the cup and the flask and the dainty damsels was at long last over. Disillusionment gave rise to despair which, in turn, bred a reckless resolve to push forward into Sind. Shah Hussain was alarmed. Though small in number, the Mughals could fight like devils when caught in a tight corner. Not wanting to run the risk of a straight fight, he offered peace at generous terms. Humayun swallowed the bait. He agreed to leave Sind provided a safe passage through Sind was assured to the Mughal army. This was exactly what Hussain wanted. Large sums of money and considerable quantities of foodgrains were placed at Humayun's disposal to facilitate his intended trek through Baluchistan to Qandhar.

This was the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Humayun, as also in that of the infant Prince Akbar. The pleasures of Jun were soon to be forgotten in the travails of a journey beset not only with natural hazards, but also with the hostility of tribal chiefs under the tutelage of the Mirzas Kamran, Askari and Hindal.

It was on 10 July 1543, that Humayun started on his march out of Sind. Hamida Banu Begum, as other ladies of the harem, were given by Shah Hussain special escorts for their protection. Arrangements for the comfort of Akbar and his nurses during the journey were entrusted to Khwaja Muazzam, brother of Hamida Banu, and Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan, husband of Jiji Anaga. The litters assigned to carry Maham and her ward were decorated with silks and rich tapestries, and were virtually sealed against sand and dust. Though worried at the uncertainty of the future, Humayun accepted with philosophic calm the turn destiny had taken. Astrologers were consulted to determine an auspicious hour for the start of the march. Prayers were said and alms distributed before the drums were beaten to proclaim that the time had come to leave Jun. A section of the small force led by Bairam Khan, formed the advance guard. Then followed Humayun and his family, flanked on either side by their personal bodyguard. Tardi Beg brought up the rear.

Though the exit from Sind was a major setback, Humayun read in it a hidden design of Allah for restoring to the house of Timur the glory it once enjoyed. The predictions of astrologers at the birth of Akbar sustained him in this hour of what looked like

an ignominious retreat from Hindustan. Akbar was his mascot. The child, he was convinced, was a harbinger of good fortune. He remembered the words of Khwaja Ahmad Jam who, in a dream at Lahore nearly three years ago, had encouraged him not to lose heart as good fortune was round the corner. Humayun believed that Akbar was a reincarnation of the Khwaja himself. Boosted by this conviction, he took the surrender to Shah Hussain with an equanimity that surprised his followers. The crossing of the river Bhakkar was eventless. Hussain scrupulously kept the terms of the compact. The Mughals were escorted out of Sind by contingents of his army commanded by generals of repute. At the border, before he entered Baluchistan, a sealed letter from the Shah was handed over to Humayun. In this communication, Hussain praised Humayun's decision to eschew war, bade him a cordial farewell, and assured him of his neutrality in Mughal affairs. He wrote:

Circumstances left me no alternative but to maintain neutrality not only between you and your brothers, but also between you and the present rulers of Hindustan. The independence of Sind would have been endangered had I taken any other course. Whereas I sympathize with you, it would have been imprudent on my part to stray from the path of friendship for all. At one stage, armed conflict between us looked imminent. The great Allah be praised for saving us from that eventuality. Your acceptance of the peace plan was an act of high statesmanship. We now part as friends. At this time when you are about to leave Sind, I would like to convey to you and your family our good wishes for the future. May the Almighty protect you from the dangers that apparently lie ahead. Farewell, friend! I am happy at the thought that the terms of the peace agreement were observed in letter and spirit by both sides. I must not close this letter without invoking God's protection for your infant son Jala-ud-din Muhammad Akbar. The circumstances of his birth at Amarkot are known to all. In Sind there is a saying that a child born amidst strangers grows up to amass fame and riches. We shall watch his future with interest.

In the end, I would like to seek your forgiveness for such inconveniences as you may have suffered whilst on our territory.

This letter was meant to be a confession by Hussain of his difficulties. He was no friend of Humayun; neither was he an enemy of Sher Shah. His support to Kamran Mirza and his associates in hostility to Humayun was no more than a tactic in self-preservation, a means to safeguard the independence of his kingdom.

Humayun had entered Sind in January 1541, and he started his march out of it in July 1543. During this period of thirty months, the Providence led him from one milepost to another without giving any indication of the future that was in store for him. His marriage with Hamida, Banu at Pat in September 1541 and the birth of Akbar in 1542 turned out to be the two events on which came to rest the greatness associated with the Mughal empire. Dangerous situations often generated within Humayun reckless courage which enabled him to overcome hurdles that looked almost insuperable. Indigence was the cradle and uncertainty about the future the milk that spawned in him the will to conquer and a capacity to adjust himself with amazing facility to the changing circumstances.

The course of Akbar's life from the time he was born was too a zig of narrow escapes and zag of perilous situations. That he came out unscathed has been ascribed by many historians to the protecting hand of supernatural powers. This may or may not be true. What cannot be denied is that his transition from infancy to boyhood coincided with a period of acute emotional stresses for both Humayun and Hamida Banu. His upbringing was thus, to a large extent, devoid of parental supervision—an omission which may in part explain the astonishing fact that to the end of his days he could neither read nor write. Illiteracy helped him, in a way, to use his brain-power with striking ingenuity, uninhibited as it was by restraints normally produced by academic studies. His liberalism was the child of an unburdened mind. So was the intellectual robustness he brought to bear in giving the country a sound, new-look administration.

The first four years of Akbar's life were ridden with perplexing uncertainties. His sensitive mind, during this period, apparently imbibed complexes which later found expression in daring acts to change personal and social values. Some children succumb to the stresses of early years, and are never able to become the masters of their destiny; others accept the challenge, and strive throughout to make nature serve their purposes. Akbar apparently

belonged to the second category. The compensation he sought for the grim loneliness of the years of infancy and early boyhood was of a revolutionary nature; he denounced tradition, and prescribed new codes of conduct for rulers and the ruled. The deserts of Rajasthan and Sind, as also the benumbing snows and storms of Central Asia, were perhaps the breeding grounds for the unconventional and the dauntless in Akbar's character.

## Chequered Childhood

Akbar was a precocious child. Those who had the opportunity to observe him at close quarters tended to believe that he was the reincarnation of some saint or seer. Abul Fazl refers to a conviction among the religious elite that a Hindu sage had taken birth in the person of Akbar to bring about unity in the heterogeneity that was Hindustan.

In later years, Jiji Anaga told a story which, if not a puerile exercise in the all too common vice of flattery, confirmed that Akbar was no ordinary child. He comprehended all that happened around him, and showed an extraordinary faculty to express himself eloquently at an age when most babies can hardly babble a few vowels. As recorded by Abul Fazl:

One fine evening when she was nursing Akbar (who was then eight months old) and inwardly grieving over the jealousy of Maham Anaga and other nurses at the prince's attachment to her, a virtual miracle came to pass. Akbar looked intently at Jiji's sad face, turned around to make certain there was no one else in the room, and suddenly spoke thus: 'Be of good cheer for the celestial light of the *'khilafat'* shall abide in thy bosom and shall bestow on the night of thy sorrow the effulgence of joy. But see that thou reveal this our secret to no one, that thou dost not proclaim untimely this mystery of God's power, for hidden designs and predictions are contained therein.\*

\**Akbarnama*, Folio 187.



After having said this, Akbar blissfully went to sleep. He woke up in the morning to find Jiji happy with a glow of contentment on her face. His knowing smile was unmistakable. Thereafter, Jiji took no notice of the complaints made to Humayun by some disgruntled attendants that she was practising black magic to prevent Akbar from accepting anyone's milk but her own.

As desired by the infant prince, Jiji kept this story a closely guarded secret till he came to the throne in 1556. One day when Akbar, while hunting in the forests around Delhi, killed a huge snake by fearlessly seizing its tail with his right hand and quelling it. His companions were astounded at the courage and the strength of the young Emperor. It was then that Jiji narrated the fourteen-year-old story to underline the supernatural faculties Akbar was blessed with.

The bulk of this story was apparently concocted by some servile sycophants. Jiji Anaga's exaggerations were perhaps based on some observations regarding the child's uncommon intelligence and memory.

Humayun's small force marched out of Sind, not knowing precisely the destination it was heading for. Hope was its guide and the will to survive the main weapon. The western part of Babar's empire was held firmly by Mirza Kamran. Unbridled ambition had made him the bitterest foe of Humayun. Mirzas Askari and Hindal, as also Yadgar-Nasir Mirza,\* had thrown their lot on the side of Kamran in the belief that Humayun would never be able to stage a comeback and stake a claim to his patrimony. They were known to have made plans to resist any move by the Emperor to gain a foothold in territories under their sway. The tribal chiefs of Baluchistan had been forewarned against permitting Humayun to pass through their lands. They felt certain that the demoralized imperial forces would not be able to fight their way through Baluchistan to Qandhar. Secret instruction for the arrest of Humayun and his senior *amirs* had been issued to some trusted chieftains.

The route Humayun took was thus beset with hazards and traps too numerous to count. But this did not deter him from his resolve to make the best of a situation that, to say the least, was dismal. In fact, he had no alternative. His very survival was at

\*Yadgar-Nasir Mirza was son of Babar's brother Nasir Mirza.

stake. The hope that some Baluchi clans might support his cause sustained his morale. The going was fairly easy till the party reached Mustang\* and pitched their tents there for a breather. It was here that one of Askari's Uzbek scouts, Chippi Bahadur,\*\* came galloping to forewarn Humayun that an attack by the Mirza was imminent. "I am an old servant of the Padshah. Loyalty impells me to reveal that Mirza Askari is marching towards Mustang at the head of a sizable force. He is under orders from Mirza Kamran to capture the Emperor and send him to Kabul in chains. There is no time to lose. It is of utmost urgency that the Emperor leaves this camp immediately. My services are at his disposal," said Chippi Bahadur to Bairam Khan.\*\*\*

The Khan realized the gravity of the situation, and hurried to the royal tent through a secret passage to advise Humayun to flee to safety along with the young Empress. At first reluctant, Humayun accepted the suggestion. Hamida Banu Begum was woken up and asked to get ready for a dash to the hills nearby. "How about Akbar?" she inquired impatiently. The Emperor replied: "The cold is intense. The journey ahead is hazardous in the extreme. The prince will not be able to stand the strain. We will leave him to the care of God. Have no fears. The great Allah will protect him."

With tears rolling down her cheeks, Hamida gave a parting hug to her one-year old son, and walked out to take the pillion seat on her husband's horse. It was not the time for her to ride separately. She would not have been able to keep pace with the party. The couple galloped out of the camp shortly after midnight. They were accompanied by forty trusted followers. Chippi Bahadur was one of them. Besides Hamida, the only other lady to accompany Humayun was Ayshek Aka, daughter of a Baluchi chief.

Humayun fled to the hills, leaving all the baggage and valuables behind. When in the early hours of the morning the advance guard of Askari's force reached the camp, they were sorely disappointed to find that the Emperor had fled. "The bird has flown away," they told Askari when he reached the camp a couple of hours later.

Feigning surprise at the action of Humayun, Askari declared

\*Near the present site of Quetta.

\*\*Referred to in some history books as Jai Bahadur.

\*\*\*Bairam Khan was with the imperial army at Qanauj. He rejoined Humayun at Jun after surmounting great hardships.

that he had come to Mustang only to pay his respects to the Emperor.

God is my witness. There is no grudge or malice in my heart. I yearn to bring about unity between the Emperor and Mirza Kamran. Whosoever gives me information about the whereabouts of my brother, he will be amply rewarded not only by me but by the great Allah as well.

The *amirs* assembled to greet Askari kept silent. Nobody in fact knew the place to which Humayun had repaired. Soon Maham Anaga, Akbar's nurse, brought out the heavily-wrapped infant and placed him in the arms of Askari. Maham, her voice choking with emotion, said:

This is now your responsibility. Before leaving, His Majesty ordered me to entrust the young prince to you. He is the cream of the progeny of the elements and the heavenly bodies. May Your Highness protect him from the evil eye. My duty is done. Now I shall await your orders.

Askari was perceptibly moved, and swore by the holy Prophet in a loud voice:

I accept the charge with utmost humility. My trust is in God. The prince will accompany me to Qandhar with all his nurses and personal staff. I see in him an image of Hazrat Ahmed of Jam. I shall protect him with every resource at my command. Come forward, Maham, and take charge of the infant. We shall be leaving for Qandhar as soon as arrangements for the return journey are completed.

At the advice of Bairam Khan, Humayun dropped the plan to proceed to Qandhar. Instead, he decided to go to Persia and seek the help of Shah Tahmasp for regaining the western segment of the empire that Babar built. This seemed to him to be the only way to beat the designs of Mirza Kamran. The agony of separation from Akbar weighed heavily on his and Hamida Banu's minds. However, they strove to reconcile themselves to what they considered the will of God. Despair, at times, led Humayun to

harbour thoughts of renunciation. It was not the first time that he thought of spending the remaining years of his life in Mecca. Bairam Khan, however, dissuaded him. The Shah, he felt, would be glad to give assistance to the royal fugitives. The subsequent events proved the soundness of his judgment. Fate guided Humayun's footsteps; so it did the journey of Akbar to Qandhar.

Askari was true to his pledge. He made suitable arrangements for the prince's travel. Steps were taken to protect him from high winds and sleet that gave the cold an extra bitterness. Trusted officers were deputed to ensure his safety on the way. The party reached Qandhar on 16 December 1543, and the same day Askari entrusted Akbar to the care of his wife, Sultan Begum.\* To quote Abul Fazl, "that cupola of chastity, out of her abundant wisdom, looked after the prince with love and devotion." The Begum was a gracious lady, deeply religious and conscious of her obligations as a trustee of the child. The selfless constancy with which she tended Akbar for over a year has been commended by every historian. As a result, Akbar became deeply attached to her. He grew up to give her the respect due to a mother.

In later years, i.e., after Akbar came to the throne, Sultan Begum often told stories about the Emperor's precocity as an infant. She remembered the day when Askari, playing the guardian-father in the traditional Mughal fashion, struck the 15-month-old Akbar with his turban to knock him off his feet.\*\* The toddler quickly got up and stood defiantly as if challenging his uncle to try to down him again! Akbar told Abul Fazl that he fully remembered the incident.

For the next nearly eighteen months, Akbar continued to bask in the love given to him by Sultan Begum and other ladies of Askari's harem, blissfully ignorant of the hard decisions his father was called upon to make in Persia. It was not till the middle of 1545 that the quiet of Qandhar was broken by the sound of the drums of the advancing Mughal and Persian troops. Humayun's comeback bid, with the help of fourteen thousand crack soldiers placed under his command by Shah Tashmasp, unnerved Askari.

\*Sultan Begum went, after her husband's death, to Mecca in company with Gulbadan Begum and other royal ladies in 1574.

\*\*It is a Turki custom that when a child begins to walk the father or guardian-father, or whoever represents them, takes off his turban and strikes the child with it, as he is going along, so that he may fall down.

He took stock of a rapidly deteriorating situation, and at one time was known to have made up his mind to surrender. Kamran was, however, made of a stronger fibre, and he succeeded in dissuading his brother from making peace with the allies. Promises of quick and substantial reinforcements from Kabul led Askari to close the gates of the city, place the garrison on full alert, and prepare to resist Humayun's challenge for as long as he could.

Kamran ordered that Akbar should be sent to Kabul with all his staff and Anagas. Sultan Begum was in tears when the time came for her to part with her charge. She kissed the three-year-old Akbar on the forehead, and raised her hands in prayer for his safety. The scene inside the fortress was charged with emotion when Maham Anaga, pensive but calm, carried the prince in her arms to the waiting litter. Accompanying her were Jiji Anaga and two senior *amirs*\* sent by Kamran to escort the child. The cold was intense. Qandhar was enveloped in a thick layer of snow. The journey ahead was full of hazards. When the party left amidst much sobbing and shedding of tears, Askari walked up to comfort his wife: "Be of good cheer. The prince is in safe hands. Allah will protect him."

Akbar's half-sister, Bakhshi Banu, was also sent with him. In order that they might not be recognized on the way, Akbar and his sister were given the names Mirak and Bija, respectively. At Qilat, the party put up for the night at the house of a Hazara chief. According to Abul Fazl, "the lustre on the face of the divine child was too striking to be missed by anybody," and the host soon realized that "the holy one of the age" was taking shelter under his roof. Suspecting that the identity of the prince had become known, the leader of the escort party considered it prudent to resume the march to Ghazni the very next morning. Accordingly, the prince and his entourage left Qilat before the rising of the sun. The sudden departure did not surprise the shrewd host. He seemed well aware of the risk that a longer halt involved. When the mini-caravan arrived safely at Kabul a few days later, Kamran held a thanksgiving assembly at the Shah-ara garden. He was glad to hold in his custody a hostage which, if need arose, could turn defeat into victory. Kamran was as unscrupulous as he

\*One of these *amirs* was Khizr Khan Hazara's brother and the other Qurban Karawalbeg, head of Kamran's bodyguard.

was cunning.

Khanzada Begum, Babar's elder sister, was the seniormost lady in the fort at Kabul. Akbar was placed in her charge. She loved the prince dearly, and spared no effort to make him feel at home in the new surroundings. In the built of Akbar's body, she saw a carbon copy of Babar himself: "He has the same feet, the same hands, and the same lustre on his forehead," she told Kamran when the latter went one day to her palace to inquire about the prince's progress. The Mirza looked at his nephew intently, and agreed that the resemblance was striking. He was, however, not prepared to accept the implication that in mien and muscle Akbar was the better of his son Ibrahim. An opportunity to prove his point soon came his way. It was the Shab-i-Barat day. Kamran presented his son a pair of kettle-drums which caught the fancy of Akbar. The two hummed and hued for some time to decide as to who should possess the drums. Kamran, feigning to play the benign referee, ordered a bout between the two. "Whosoever wins will be the owner," he declared. Akbar, though younger to Ibrahim by eighteen months, readily took up the challenge, and came out in the arena dressed in the briefs of a *pahalwan*. Kamran and his companions were amused at this display of self-confidence by the three-year-old prince. They were, however, certain that the bigger-boned Ibrahim would soon deflate his pride. Akbar was, however, too alert and agile to be contained by his adversary. Displaying an almost professional proficiency, he pinned Ibrahim to the ground in less than a minute. The victory was decisive. A jubilant Akbar walked away with the kettle-drums to the dais where sat Khanzada Begum. She kissed and patted him, and recalled a similar feat by Babar at his age. Kamran secured for Ibrahim another pair of drums, but that did not in any way arouse Akbar's envy. He was in possession of a pair acquired by the dint of his strength. Nothing else mattered to him.

The siege of Qandhar dragged on for many weeks. Askari stretched his defiance to a point of war to the finish. The news of defections by Persian troops from the allied army encouraged him to turn down Humayun's repeated calls for surrender. In search of a quick settlement without loss of much life, the latter sent Bairam Khan as his envoy to Kabul. The Khan was received by Kamran with honour, but on the question of surrender and unity among brothers, the Mirza maintained a tight-lipped silence.

During his stay in Kabul, Bairam called on Akbar more than once, and each time assured him that Akbar would soon be united with his parents. To many an innocent how and why by the prince, Bairam could give no satisfactory answer. At his last meeting, the Khan presented the prince with sandalwood and ivory toys which Humayun and Hamida Banu had sent for him.

These are some of the playthings which His Majesty and the *Walida Mohtrima* (respected mother) have sent for you. The rest—a lot of them—will be given when they meet you. They want you to be happy and cheerful. I will tell them that you are now a big boy with roses in your cheeks. May the great Allah make you the sovereign of the whole world.

Before leaving, Bairam kissed the prince's hand in obeisance, bowed low, and departed with deference due to an heir-apparent. Kamran's agent, who accompanied Bairam wherever he went, must have reported to his master the proceedings of this meeting, but the latter considered it prudent not to question the ambassador on the propriety of his submissions and veiled remarks.

On one pretext or another, Kamran forced Bairam Khan to mark time in Kabul for nearly six weeks. Time was on his side. He wanted the besiegers of Qandhar to exhaust themselves to standstill before opening peace negotiations. Bairam saw through the Mirza's stratagem, and insisted on leaving when the news of continuing defections from the allied army became persistent. Kamran, in the end, agreed to his request but, as a device to underline his good intentions, he sent Khanzada Begum with him. The ostensible purpose of her mission was to negotiate terms of peace, but in actuality Kamran wanted her to encourage Askari to maintain resistance for as long as he could.

The scene in Qandhar, however, changed dramatically soon after Bairam's return. A daring assault by Humayun's Mughal contingents resulted in the capture of the fortress. Askari surrendered unconditionally on 3 September 1545, and was taken prisoner. The Persian troops then realized the futility of their desert-and-defect game and returned to cooperate with the Emperor in consolidating the gains of the victory. Humayun was now not in a mood to waste time over the modalities of reconciliation with his allies. He took possession of the city, lodged Hamida Banu

and other members of his family in the citadel, and left post-haste for Kabul, leaving Bairam Khan to look after the administration of the conquered territory. In gratitude for his assistance, Humayun sent to Shah Tahmasp in sealed boxes the treasures found in the fort.

The advance of Humayun sent a wave of panic in Kabul. Kamran ordered the transfer of Akbar from the quarters of Khanzada Begum to his own palace, and entrusted the prince to the care of his chief wife, Mohtrima Begum. He imprisoned Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Ghaznavi, husband of Jiji Anaga. Similar treatment was meted out to other dignitaries and their wives suspected of loyalty to Humayun. These arrests led to a spate of desertions at the highest level, which made Kamran cry out in anguish: "I am alone. Nobody seems to have faith in me."

Joined on the way by Mirza Hindal and Yadgar-Nasir Mirza\*, Humayun broke through the outer defences of Kabul following fearsome attacks on enemy positions. In these assaults, Mirza Hindal fought with such disregard for his life as to win the admiration of his brother. Never again were his bonafides doubted. Mirza Kamran made plans to wage a long, defensive war against the rapidly advancing Mughal army, but when the Governor of Kabul, the famous Qaracha Khan, opened the gates of the city for Humayun to enter without a fight, the Mirza saw the futility of further resistance, ordered a rampart of the fort to be broken down, and fled with his son to take shelter in the hills nearby.

Humayun entered Bala-Hisar on 15 November, 1545. Jauhar, who was an eye-witness of the events that followed, tells that the Emperor's first act was to inquire about the safety of Akbar. He met the prince after nearly two years, and found him in good health. He then ordered the release from jail of Shams-ud-Din Muhammad and others imprisoned by Kamran for the sin of being associated with his son's upbringing. In thanksgiving, prayers were held in all mosques of the city and alms distributed to the poor.

According to Abul Fazl, Akbar was visibly moved when Humayun gave him the fatherly embrace. The child clung to Humayun as if to say that he (Humayun) should never leave him

\*Both Hindal and Yadgar Nasir Mirza made a dramatic get-away from Kabul soon after Bairam Khan's departure for Qandhar.



alone again. The *amirs* standing by them came forward to pay their homage to the 'Wali-Ahomad' (heir-apparent). They came one by one to bow low in respect and express their thanks to the Almighty for protecting him. Akbar seemed to realize the solemnity of occasion, and stood by his father with such show of controlled demeanour as pleased the Emperor. Then Maham and Jiji Anagas stepped forward to escort the prince to his quarters.

At the long last, Humayun was in possession of a kingdom he could call his own. Tribal chiefs from nearly every principality came to Kabul to pledge their loyalty to him. His large-hearted beneficence and the declaration of general amnesty pleased the Afghans.

After attending to urgent administrative matters, Humayun deputed Yadgar-Nasir Mirza to escort Hamida Banu Begum from Qandhar to Kabul. She came in the spring. The city was decorated in the traditional Mughal style to welcome her. Songs were sounded and drums beaten when she and her entourage entered Bala-Hisar. Akbar, accompanied by Maham, was in the frontline of the senior ladies gathered to welcome her. According to Jauhar, a glow of bliss engulfed the citadel when the Empress alighted from her litter to hold the prince in her arms. The scene brought tears of joy to the eyes of men and women present to greet the party.

Akbar knew instinctively that a vacuum in his life was filled. To the joy of everyone present, he frisked about joyfully to give vent to his excitement. Humayun was wonderstruck. He thought the child would not be able to recognize his mother. After all, he was only one-year old when he parted company with her. A courtier remarked that a child could smell the fragrance of his mother's body from a distance, and that even if the prince had been blindfolded he would have instinctively made his way to the Empress. Humayun was intrigued. Seldom did he accept a statement without checking it from all angles. A test was called for. So he ordered that an assembly of ladies, all dressed in similar garments, should be held at *Urta Bagh*,\* the next day. No place of distinction was to be earmarked for the Empress. When the ladies were assembled, Akbar was to be brought in from the gate opposite the royal *shamiana*. Humayun wanted to make sure that the child

\**Urta* is a Turki word meaning the middle, *Urta Bagh*, therefore, means middle or inner garden.

would recognize his mother from a distance and walk up to her ignoring all other ladies.

When the stage was set for this experiment Akbar entered the garden in the company of Maham Anaga. The sun was gradually sliding down to its resting place in the distant west. The air was laden with the fragrance of flowers in bloom all around. Decorations in the garden were in tune with the majestic backdrop of a grey Kabul evening about to merge itself in a twilight resplendent in its gold and orange colours. Humayun sat unobtrusively under a royal umbrella pitched a little distance from the marble pavilion where Babar used to hold his wine parties. The *umera* in attendance, ignorant of the purpose of the function, vied with one another to catch the eye of the Padshah. Their gold and silver-embroidered garments were in noticeable contrast with the sombre grey dress that Humayun was wearing. The Emperor was in a serious, reflective mood. He was out to test not only the veracity of a seemingly controversial generalization, but also to determine the intelligence quotient of his son. His eyes were riveted on Akbar from the moment the prince entered the garden. Propelled as if by an overpowering instinct, Akbar made a beeline for the distant tent where an assemblage of women, all dressed alike, were engaged in finding answers to problems of diverse female interest. Humayun rose up from his seat in excitement as the prince came near the *shamiana*. Without hesitation and without concern at what was happening around him, Akbar went straight to the place where sat Hamida Banu, and threw himself into her arms. The Empress was delighted. So was Humayun. He quickly came to the tent, and bestowed upon his son many a toy of gold and silver. His doubts were set at rest. He became convinced ever more strongly that Akbar was Divinity incarnate, and that he was destined to achieve some great purpose of the Almighty Allah.

For a time, peace reigned in Kabul. A few, stray voices of dissent were put down by Humayun with a firm hand. Combining ruthlessness with generosity, he succeeded in winning the allegiance of even such factions as were known to favour Kamran. Upon his own followers, he bestowed gifts and honours according to their rank, and thus made certain of their continued loyalty. Administration was streamlined to save the population from harassment by self-seeking adventurers. The prevalent calm in the capital and the territories nearby gave rise to a feeling of well-being not only

at the court but among the masses as well. Humayun considered the time opportune for holding a carnival of pleasure culminating in the circumcision\* of the prince. As was his wont, the Emperor asked his astrologers to fix an auspicious hour for the ceremony, and ordered a seven-day run of festivities to precede it. Bayazid gives a vivid account of the manner in which Kabul was decorated for the occasion. Carpets and tapestries of ingenious design were hung over the outer walls of all palaces and public buildings. The *umera* competed with one another in embellishing the exteriors of their houses with multi-coloured *phoolkaris* on which were inscribed in Persian and Turki many a verse to felicitate the Emperor on the happy occasion. Almsgiving and mass prayers in the main mosques and city squares were the traditional ways in which the rich and the poor associated themselves with the rejoicings.

A feature of the celebrations was a wrestling tournament in which Humayun himself took part. He grappled with Imam Quli Qurch. Neither Abul Fazl nor Bayazid records who won, but it may be a reasonable surmise that the Emperor floored his opponent following a brief exhibition of the shift-and-dodge art of wrestling. In his youth, Humayun showed a remarkable aptitude for this sport, and he invited many famous wrestlers to instruct him in the tricks that humbled sheer might. The bout that aroused much interest was the one between Mirza Hindal and Yadgar-Nasir Mirza. Very nearly equal in strength, the two wrestled for over half an hour before the contest was declared a draw. Bayazid tells of many other evenly-contested bouts between high-ranking courtiers, and ends by saying that seldom before had such a pageant of wrestling been seen in Kabul. This show was the high-point of the celebrations. Then Humayun bade preparations be made for a great feast. He distributed fiefs, presents and robes of honour to his relatives and courtiers. Mirza Hindal, who had distinguished himself in the battle for Kabul, received the important principality of Ghazni and its dependencies, while Zamindawar and Tiri were given to Ulugh Mirza.\*\*

Humayun was not fated to enjoy for long this spell of compara-

\*According to Vincent A. Smith, Akbar's circumcision ceremony was held on 6 March 1546. It was only after this date that this dependence on wet nurses ended.

\*\*Ulugh Mirza was the son of Muhammad Sultan Mirza.

tive peace and tranquillity. The compact with Shah Tahmasp provided that Qandhar was to be ceded to Persia after this territory, along with Kabul and Badakhshan, had been conquered. A diplomatic mission from Persia, headed by Walid Beg, came to Kabul to press the demand for Qandhar. Humayun received the mission with utmost courtesy, and explained that the terms of the treaty would be fully honoured when the rulers of Badakhshan shed their independence and recognized him as their overlord. Accordingly, letters were addressed to Mirza Sulaiman and his son Ibrahim, demanding that they come to Kabul to pay their homage to the Padshah but they were not inclined to oblige. Instead, they strengthened the border defences and made ready for war if one was trust upon them. Not in a mood to take this rebuff lying down, Humayun assembled a punitive force of nearly eight thousand horsemen, and marched out of Kabul in the spring of 1546 to compel the recalcitrant Mirzas into submission. Despite a heroic resistance put up by the Badakhshanis, Humayun broke through their defences to capture Qila-Zaffar. Sulaiman and his son fled to Khost. The fruits of this spectacular victory were, however, denied to the Emperor. At the village of Shahdan, he fell dangerously ill, and reports became current in Badakhshan and outside that he had died. In the medieval times, both in the Orient and in Europe, kingdoms collapsed not unoften when their kings passed away. In the reported death of Humayun, Mirza Kamran saw a God-sent opportunity to stage a comeback. With the help of a force placed at his command by his father-in-law Shah Hussain Beg of Sind, he struck with lightning speed to reconquer that lost kingdom. His vengeance was terrible. All those known to be sympathetic to Humayun were subjected to barbarous tortures. Even women and children did not escape Kamran's wrath. But when it came to dealing with Akbar and his nurses, for reasons best known to himself, he was a picture of docility itself. He addressed the panicstricken Maham and Jiji Anagas with extreme politeness, and asked them to continue looking after the prince unmindful of the change that had taken place:

You are not the servants of Humayun, but the servants of a prince who is as dear to me as he was to my dead brother. Grieve not over the fate that has befallen your ward. He has lost a father, and I a brother. God willed it that way. The prince

will be safe in my custody. Neither care nor affection will be denied to him. Look after him with devotion. Continue to perform your duties faithfully. Forget not the words of Shaikh Sa'adi that love is its own reward. Now take the prince to his quarters, and explain to him in suitable words the import of the events of the last two days.

Akbar, who stood motionless by the side of Maham Anaga, listened calmly to the words spoken by his uncle. Not betraying any emotional disquiet, he gripped Maham's hand as the two walked out of the hall of audience. Other nurses followed them. Kamran smiled triumphantly. A hostage of inestimable value was in his custody. He issued instructions that a strict watch be maintained over the movements of the nurses and their ward. It was not in his nature to take chances.

Kamran took it for granted that Humayun was dead. His surprise was great when it became known that the Emperor was on his way to Kabul at the head of large army. He had little time to consolidate his position and take the offensive against a rapidly advancing enemy. At the advice of his generals, Kamran decided to try to block the narrow passes leading to Kabul in order to gain time for strengthening the city's defences. The iron-chested Sher Afghan was chosen for this difficult assignment. He proceeded hastily to intercept Humayun, but failed to stem the advance of the Mughal army. The battle of Deh Afghanistan, famous for the duel in which Qarachah Khan overpowered Sher Afghan, proved crucial. In September 1546, Humayun took his position at Koh-i-Akaban (Eagles' Hill) near Kabul, and sent messages to Kamran to surrender. The Mirza not only did not lay down arms, but got ready to wage a long, defensive war. Desperation bred in him a type of ruthlessness which has few parallels in Mughal history. His demoniacal wrath fell particularly on the relatives of those fighting on the side of Humayun. The three sons of Bapus Khan,\* ranging in ages from three to eight, were beheaded and their corpses flung over the ramparts towards that section of the besieging force which was known to be under their father's command.

\*Bapus Khan was a former Prime Minister of Kamran and had defected to Humayun when the Emperor advanced towards Kabul following the capture of Qandhar.

Qaracha Khan was threatened that a similar fate would befall his son if the siege was not lifted. Two sons of Mohasib Beg were tied to the stakes and suspended by ropes from the castle wall. The wife of Bapus Khan was given over to the rabble in the bazar to be dishonoured. The wife of Muhammad Qasim Mochi\* and also some other ladies were suspended by their breasts from the battlements in a savage bid to break the morale of the Mughal army. When these brutalities failed to dispirit the enemy, Kamran played what he considered to be his trump card: he ordered Akbar to be exposed on that part of the rampart where the bombardment was the heaviest. Many a cannon-ball fell to the prince's right and left, but none mercifully hit him. Abul Fazl's description of Akbar's miraculous escape bears quotation:

When this evil act (the exposure of Akbar) was practised, the hands of the masksmen trembled, the arrows flew crooked, and the stocks of steel and stone congealed. Sambal Khan, master of the imperial artillery felt his ardour grow cold and wondered what had happened to him. He also noticed with surprise that the shots of musketeers known for their accuracy were going far off their mark. This miracle was noticed by everybody. When Sambal Khan looked at the ramparts of the castle, his vision quickened and he recognised His Majesty the Shahinshah. The horror of the sight almost drove the souls out of the bodies of the gunners, and they all become listless. In a moment, he ordered the firing to stop. Wherever God's protection stands sentinel over His chosen one, what power has human strategem to do him harm?

When Humayun came to know of the means chosen by Kamran to save the garrison from the fate that awaited it, he ordered that bombardment should be discontinued. Instead, he resorted to a blockade so tight as to "deny access to the fort even to an ant." The siege lasted seven months before Kamran, realizing the futility of further resistance, fled along with his son Ibrahim and daughter Habiba.

\*Muhammad Qasim Mochi was Humayun's superintendent of prisons. It was he who carried out Humayun's order to strangle Yadgar-Nasir Mirza to death.

Humayun entered the citadel on 27 April 1547, and immediately went to the apartment where Akbar was staying. He lifted the young prince, gave him a paternal hug and a kiss on the forehead, and thanked the Lord for His mercy: "It is a miracle that he is alive. The great Allah be praised for the umbrella of protection held over him." Saying this, Humayun knelt for a while in prayer, and then rose to inquire about the welfare of other members of the family.

As customary, Humayun's comeback meant death for many and kudos for a chosen few. Akbar's nurses and those responsible for looking after him were the recipients of rich gifts and high honours. Akbar himself, now over four years, was loaded with presents by Humayun and by all those who came to Kabul to pledge their loyalty to the Emperor.

Royal children in medieval times matured early. At five, Babar knew by heart the works of Hafiz and Shaikh Sa'adi. Humayun, though lacking the intellectual robustness of his father, was well acquainted with the works of Persian and Turki scholars before Babar returned to Kabul in 1514 following his defeat in the battle of Ghazdan by the Uzbek general Obaidullah.\* By these standards, Akbar at five was an ignoramus. His aversion to scholastic courses had not remained unnoticed, and Humayun was keen that the prince should quickly make up for the time lost. He tended to believe that but for the unsettled circumstances, Akbar would have fully lived up to the family tradition of acquiring literary laurels early in life. The appointment of an eminent scholar, Assamuddin Ibrahim, to direct the prince's education was one of the first steps Humayun took after regaining Kabul. Not only was Assamuddin well-versed in the two court languages, Persian and Turki, but was also a much-respected exponent of Islamic law. No less than a dozen other tutors, each a specialist in his branch of learning, were assigned to assist the head preceptor. According to Abul Fazl, it was on 20 November 1547, that Akbar first went to school and, true to the Mughal custom, the day was devoted to prayers, almsgiving, feeding the poor, and all other modes of propitiating the supernatural powers. The day on which the prince embarked on formal studies was fixed after consultations with the court astrologers, only one of whom had the courage to

\*Humayun at that time was a little over six years of age.

tell the Emperor that according to his calculations the prince had little chance of attaining normal scholastic honours:

He will be wiser than the wisest of his age. His knowledge will, however, come from within himself. His sagacity will be rooted not in books, but in divine inspiration. Your Majesty may send him to a school, but the august prince is a school unto himself. Neither Sa'adi nor Hafiz has much to teach him. He himself is destined to be a teacher of mankind.

Humayun was pleased with this prediction. Nevertheless, after customary religious ceremonies, in which the high-minded Hamida Banu Begum played the central role, Akbar was escorted by Maham Anaga to a school inside the fort itself. The days of Akbar's infancy were over. He was then four years, four months and four days old.\*

Humayun was keen that his son should develop proficiency in fine arts as well. He, therefore, invited to Kabul two famed Persian painters, Mir Sayid Ali and Abdul Samad, and asked them to initiate Akbar in the art of the brush. Their efforts did not, however, go beyond infusing in the child a lively interest in the works of the old masters. In later years, he became a connoisseur so knowledgeable that he could identify the authorship of a work at first sight. Not only that: if a painting was the collective work of several artists, he found little difficulty in naming the designer of each part.\*\*

Maulana Assamuddin Ibrahim was, however, not satisfied with Akbar's progress. Discreetly, he informed Humayun more than once that the child's heart lay not in books but in outdoor activities, such a hunting, horse and camel riding, shooting, wrestling and study of animal and bird habits. The Emperor did not take the Maulana seriously, thinking that his reaction was typical of an overzealous teacher. Several celebrated men of learning like

\*There is a discrepancy in dates given by Abul Fazl and some other historians, in particular Vincent A. Smith. A statement by Jauhar is pertinent: "To protect him from the evil eye a certain secrecy was observed and Akbar's date of birth was moved back from Thursday, November 23, 1542 to Sunday, October 15, 1542."

\*\*It was a common practice in those days for several persons to cooperate in the production of a single work of art.



Shaikh Bayazid and Maulana Abdul Qadir were subsequently appointed head *ataliq*, but Akbar proved to be the despair of them all. He lacked the aptitude to acquire knowledge for its own sake. A realist, Akbar revelled in the excitements of the world outside; the school, with all its harsh adjuncts, repelled him. He was a far cry from the romanticist Babar for whom a sparkling phrase or the beauty of a lyric meant joy that uplifted the soul. On the other hand, Akbar drove the dull cares away by what he himself called the joy of danger, the glory of war. The two were different, yet alike in more ways than one. The will to conquer was the H.C.F. that made them both great.

## Camp Life

There are persons whose optimism invariably gets the better of their judgment. In a way, they are the prisoners of their hopes. Neither the hard facts of reality nor the buffets of fate ever seem to curb their egotism and the tendency to over-evaluate their own capacities. Kamran was one such person. Ambition blinded him to the realities which emerged following Humayun's conquest of Kabul. Though forsaken by friends and fortune, he hoped that by some turn of luck he might still succeed in overthrowing his brother.

Kamran approached Pir Muhammad Khan,\* the Uzbek Governor of Fakh, for help. The latter responded positively, but discreetly. It was in his interest that the Mughal brothers should bleed themselves to death through protracted warfare. He was unwilling to see either Kamran or Humayun emerge strong from the conflict. He, therefore, agreed to Kamran's request, but restricted the support to such proportion as would not enable him to don the mantle of an undisputed conqueror. The shrewd Mirza saw through the Uzbek game, but decided to make the last use of what was offered to him. He captured Badakhshan through luck, and enterprise. Mirza Suleiman and his son Ibrahim fled to the mountains. A Mughal force led by Mirza Hindal and Qaracha Khan was also badly mulcted by Kamran's Uzbek mercenaries.

\*Pir Muhammad Khan was son of Jami Khan and uncle of the famous Obaidullah Khan.

Humayun took fright at these reverses, and decided to launch an all-out offensive to check the growing strength of his brother. He left Kabul on 12 June 1548, at the head of a force which lacked neither experience nor resources. He was determined to liquidate his enemies once and for all, and then to apply himself to the reconquest of the lost empire of Hindustan. The imperialists captured the fort at Badakhshan without a show of resistance by the garrison. Kamran escaped, and took refuge in the small but well-equipped fort of Telqan. Humayun went in hot chase, laid siege of the fort, and tightened the blockade so completely as to compel Kamran to sue for peace. The Emperor agreed. Generous in victory, he forgave Kamran and his associates\* their acts of disloyalty, treated them with courtesy and honour, and invited them to forge a common front first against the Uzbeks and then against the Afghan rulers of Hindustan.

The unity talks, carried at the historic fountain of Band-Kusha where nearly three decades earlier Babar accepted the pledges of loyalty from his brother Jahangir Mirza and cousin Khan Mirza, ended in solemn affirmations of obedience to the wishes of the Emperor, and it seemed that the sordid chapter of hostility among the sons of Babar Padshah had at long last come to an end. But once again the accord proved to be short-lived. To Kamran, the compact was no more than yet another tactic for self-advancement. He abrogated it as soon as he saw an opportunity to oust Humayun from Kabul.

Preferring to shelve for the time being the plan to subjugate Balkh, Humayun returned to Kabul in October 1548. For the next eighteen months, he remained content with efforts to cleanse his army and to impress upon his followers the virtues of unity and single-minded approach to the problems that faced them.

Following the accord at Band-Kusha, Humayun gave Kamran the fief of Kulab in Badakhshan; this was a minor district, and the Emperor knew that his ambitious brother could not be happy with the allotment. However, before giving Kamran the charge of a bigger and more important territory, Humayun thought he would like to have some concrete proof of his brother's change of

\*Among the top associates of Mirza Kamran were Qaracha Khan and Bapus Khan both of whom had defected to his side following a quarrel with Humayun over a trivial matter of prestige.

heart. Kamran, however, remained passive, not taking any initiative to promote the brotherly oneness he had pledged himself to advance. On the contrary, it became known in Kabul that he was negotiating with Pir Muhammad Khan for yet another attempt to retake Kabul. Sensing danger, Humayun decided to launch a massive attack on Balkh itself, and thus defuse once and for all a source of likely support to Kamran. He marched out of Kabul in the spring of 1550, and invited all his vassals to join him in an attempt to neutralize the ever-present Uzbek menace. Mirzas Hindal, Sulaiman and Ibrahim responded enthusiastically, but Kamran failed to show up at the appointed rendezvous. Humayun conferred with his generals, who expressed the opinion that the campaign against Pir Muhammad could be brought to a successful conclusion before Kamran could have time to stage a march on Kabul. A couple of minor initial successes encouraged Humayun to accept this advice. Little did he know that some of his top counsellors, including Qaracha Khan, were in league with Kamran and were keeping him informed about the state of affairs in the Mughal army. In fact, these Trojan horses urged the Mirza to move quickly and try to capture Kabul while the Mughal army was engaged in the Balkh campaign. They told him that the morale of Humayun's men was at its lowest ever, and that they would defect to join his forces as soon as the news of his advance reached them.

In the meantime, Pir Muhammad Khan, assisted by Aziz Khan, son of the far-famed Obaidullah Khan, issued a call to Uzbeks all over Transoxiana to rally under his flag and bravely meet the Mughal challenge. At this critical moment there also came the news that Kamran was heading towards Kabul, and that the Mughal officers in command of the city's defence had decided to surrender without a fight.\* Panic seized the Mughal army. Humayun's bid to rally his men to action failed. He was then left with no alternative but to order a retreat. The resultant confusion ended in a total rout of the imperial army. Humayun himself had a narrow escape, and managed to reach Kabul on 23 September 1550 with a handful of his personal bodyguard. Though beaten in the race for Kabul, Kamran did not give up his plan

\*According to Bayazid, this news was planted in the Mughal camp by disloyal *amirs* who were secretly in league with Kamran.

to stage a comeback. He thought he could count on the assistance of Pir Muhammad, as also on the support of a fairly large fifth column in Humayun's camp.

Quickly regrouping the remnants of his defeated army, Humayun chose to give battle to Kamran at a strategically advantageous place outside Kabul. Disloyalty and discontent inside the city were too patent to be ignored. His plan was to block all passes leading to the capital and to that end he divided his army into four units, each headed by a commander whose loyalty he did not suspect.\* Kamran, who was as familiar with the nature of the undulating terrain as with the lines on the palm of his hand, headed for the Qipchak pass through which, he thought, it would be easier for him to force his way to victory. His calculation proved to be correct. Not only did the imperial army not offer stout resistance; it fled before a shot was fired. Once again, Humayun had a miraculous escape. A fierce sword-blow\*\* cut through his helmet, but left the head unscathed. However, he received a deep wound near the right ear, which injury all but resulted in bringing his career to a sudden end. Bleeding profusely, he just managed to elude his pursuers and, with the help of two faithful servants, reached the safety of a high-altitude hut where he dressed his wound and revived himself with a bowl of hot porridge. On the way, he discarded his bloodstained royal robes and donned instead a sheepskin coat to protect himself from cold—a change of dress which turned out to be the high spot of a drama that followed the rout of the imperial army at Qipchak pass. The Emperor's *jubba*, bearing the royal insignia, was picked up by the pursuing enemy troops and passed on to Kamran in proof of their assertion that Humayun was dead. The Mirza could not wish for a more pleasing piece of news. The evidence was clear and positive, and he used it as an argument to convince the governor of Kabul of the futility of resistance. The gates of the city were

\*According to Abul Fazl, the real innovator of this plan was Qaracha Khan who considered division to be the best means to weaken the hitting power of the imperial forces. Kamran was reportedly jubilant when he came to know about acceptance by Humayun of the advice given by Qaracha Khan. "Kabul is now mine," he exclaimed.

\*\*The name of the man who dealt this blow to Humayun was Baba-i-Kulab, the headman of the principality of Kulab, of which Kamran was the Governor.

thrown open for him and his men to enter in triumph. Kabul was once again in Kamran's hands. So was Akbar.

As always, Kamran's wrath against the supporters of Humayun was demoniacal. The Governor, Qasim Khan Barlas, was hacked limb by limb to death. His wife was ordered to be paraded naked through the streets of Kabul. However, she committed suicide by jumping into a well before Kamran's men could lay their hands upon her. Wives and female relatives of other dignitaries were mercilessly dragged out from their homes and subjected publicly to unspeakable brutalities. Infants were snatched away from their wailing mothers and nailed to the city walls for the hovering vultures to feast upon. The city was ransacked as seldom before. The plundering orgy was not restricted to money and other valuables. Young girls were particularly sought after for service in the camp. This display of steel-eyed savagery went on unchecked for three days and nights before Kamran ordered a halt.

In contrast to this expression of his perversion, the treatment accorded by Kamran to Akbar, who was then nine years old, was a praiseworthy exercise in restraint. When the prince was presented to him the day he entered Qila-Hisar, Kamran commiserated with him at the reported death of his father: "It was God's will that my brother be given a place of honour in the Heaven. Henceforth, you may consider me to be your father. I shall do my best to make you happy." According to Abul Fazl, Akbar did not lose his composure, and remained seated deferentially by the side of his uncle till the latter asked one of his aides to escort the prince to his apartment.

Kamran's show of kindness to Akbar is an enigma. Except on one occasion when he allegedly exposed him to heavy bombardment by Humayun's gunners,\* he was invariably at pains to protect him and extend to him such facilities as he would have received at the hands of his father. This solicitude was perhaps due to the reverence in which Hamida Banu's father, Shaikh Ali Akbar Jami,\*\* was held by the Mirza. Whereas, given an opportunity,

\*The story of Akbar's exposure to bombardment is highlighted by Abul Fazl, perhaps with a view to stress that God held an umbrella of protection over the prince's head.

\*\*According to Gulbadan Begum, Hamida Banu was the daughter of Mir Baba Dost, which was perhaps a name of respect for Shaikh Ali Akbar Jami.

he would have been glad to torture Humayun to death, his heart melted at the sight of Akbar. The prince, to him, was more a son of Hamida Banu than a heir to the throne of Kabul. Ali Akbar was his preceptor, a guide, at whose feet in his youth he learned to read and write.

Hindal too was known to have immense respect for the Shaikh. It has been suggested by some historians that he was in love with Hamida Banu and wanted to marry her. His reaction to Humayun's desire to take her as his wife was violent. He was greatly upset over this unforeseen development, and decided to throw in his lot with Kamran at a critical moment in the life of Humayun. Left to herself, Hamida would probably have preferred to marry Hindal, but the compulsions of the court etiquette left her no alternative but to accept the royal proposal.\* Whereas Hindal seemed to have overcome his one-time revulsion of Humayun, Kamran did not. The latter remained to the end of his days a captive of his frustrations. His treatment of Akbar was perhaps a plea to God that he was not as wicked as Humayun and some others made him out to be.

A new set of tutors for Akbar was chosen. They were all experienced teachers, well versed in subjects in which instruction was traditionally imparted to royal princes. They did their best to break Akbar's aversion to academic courses, but in vain. Kamran was apprised of the prince's propensities, but he was too busy in the affairs of the state to take any initiative to tame his nephew. The Mirza was satisfied that all that was possible had been done for the prince's education.

In the meantime, Humayun, rejoined by Hindal and Haji Muhammad, proceeded towards Badakhshan in the hope of receiving assistance from Harem Begum who, in the absence of her husband Sulaiman Mirza, was ruling the country with such firmness as was the envy of many neighbouring rulers. Her hostility to Kamran was the talk of the whole region. In the days of his homelessness, the Mirza did the indiscretion of sending her a red handkerchief along with costly gifts,\*\* but the Begum, aroused to ex-

\*For a detailed account of the protracted negotiations preceding Humayun's marriage with Hamida Banu, see Muni Lal, *Humayun*, Vikas, 1978, 104-5.

\*\*In the Orient, the red handkerchief is a symbol of love and its presentation to a lady an invitation for marriage.

treme anger at this assault on her fidelity to her husband, ordered the woman messenger cut to pieces, and waited for an opportunity to avenge the insult. When Humayun appealed to her for help, the response was quick and enthusiastic. She placed no less than twelve thousand Badakhshani troops at the Emperor's disposal and offered that she herself would take the field against Kamran. This God-sent development boosted the sagging morale of Humayun and his *amirs*, and they decided not to lose time in mounting a massive assault on Kabul.

Kamran's honeymoon with success thus quickly came to an end. When the news reached him that Humayun was alive and marching towards Kabul at the head of a force too big to be contained easily, he ascribed the report to mischief-makers, and brushed it aside as a baseless rumour. However, he soon realized that the danger was real, and made preparations to counter Mughal plans. As on the previous two occasions, he decided on a defensive war, collected large stocks of corn and other essential materials, ordered the city gates to be closed and guarded day and night against surprise attack, transferred Akbar to his (Kamran's) own palace, ordered the ladies of the harem to be placed under the protection of his personal bodyguard, and made ready to undergo the rigours of a long siege.

Within four months of the rout at Qipchak, Humayun was battling against the outer defences of Kabul. He sent Mirza Shah Sultan to Kamran with a peace offer which centred around two proposals—one, that Kabul and other parts of Babar's empire in the west be placed under Akbar and, second, that their combined forces march to Hindustan under their joint command. The offer was rejected. Kamran, however, suggested that a better basis for peace would be that he remained in possession of Kabul and Humayun occupied Badakhshan and Qandhar. This division was not acceptable to the Emperor. Shah Sultan was sent back with a further proposal that Mughal unity be cemented by Akbar's betrothal to the Mirza's daughter Habiba. Kamran was attracted by this offer, and came very near to accepting it. The powerful Qaracha Khan, however, dissuaded Kamran from saying yes to a plan which, in his words, aimed at "capturing through a marriage alliance what Humayun had failed to conquer by the dint of arms." The "Death-or-Kabul" slogan raised by the Khan caught Kamran's fancy, and he told the envoy that unless Humayun accepted his



terms for peace, the sword, and that alone, would be the arbiter of their destiny.

Humayun accepted the challenge, and ordered an all-out assault. The ensuing battle was a fierce engagement made memorable by the bravery of Mirza Hindal. Qaracha Khan was slain. His head was chopped off, and later hung on the Iron Gate outside Qila-Hisar. "He asked for it. He could not retain Kabul. Let him have death with dishonour," exclaimed Humayun as he entered the fort after victory.

Kamran managed to escape once again, this time in the guise of a wandering fakir. Accompanied by only eight followers, he took refuge in the house of Malik Muhammad, an Afghan tribal chief indebted to the Mirza for favours received earlier. Not only did this chieftain extend to Kamran protection and hospitality; he also used his resources to raise for the Mirza an army of fifteen thousand men equipped with all the weaponry in vogue. This massive assistance rekindled Kamran's hopes. This time he planned a hit-and-run campaign, and took his position in the hills around Kabul to await his opportunity.

Humayun bided his time patiently. He was understandably hesitant to risk a head-on engagement unless his army was at least equal in strength to that of his brother. At the same time, he realized that it would be injudicious to let Kamran indulge for long in his predatory tactics. Capture by Kamran of the fort of Jalalabad was a provocation that could not be ignored. Thus when in the spring of 1551 the Mirza suddenly appeared within shooting distance from Kabul, Humayun decided he could wait no longer. He moved out in strength with a firm determination to remove from his path the danger that Kamran represented.

For the first time Humayun took Akbar with him on a campaign of considerable military importance. Wearing an armour, the prince rode majestically by the side of his father, not forgetting to keep his horse a couple of paces behind the royal charger. According to Abul Fazl, there was a divine glow on Akbar's face as he acknowledged with poise the salutations of the people assembled on the route to bid farewell to him and the Emperor. In the camp, his tent was pitched not far away from that of Humayun, and the contingent of bodyguard assigned to him lacked neither courage nor loyalty. Akbar revelled in the awareness of danger that enveloped the town of tents. Humayun watched his

reactions to developments in and outside the camp with deep interest. Not only was the prince invited to take part in the councils of war; he was encouraged to express freely his views on military and administrative problems. One day, Akbar surprised the Emperor with suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the trenches that were being dug all around. His opinions were noted for their soundness and clarity. The next morning, Akbar went on an inspection round, and took some engineers to task for not implementing his suggestions faithfully.

Akbar was truly a replica of Babar in several respects. He was averse to taking chances, and spared himself no effort to ensure that his orders were carried to the last dot. At nine plus, he showed himself to be a keen observer of events around him. What was more, he took upon himself the duties of a leader with surprising facility. He was a born helmsman.

Hindal, who was now thirty-two years old, was in overall command of the Mughal forces. By display of unusual loyalty he had endeared himself to the Emperor. Some experts in the science of warfare, however, considered him to be unnecessarily reckless and lacking in the virtue of patience deemed essential to fight a foe as wily and unpredictable as Kamran. This criticism was vindicated when on 20 November 1551, Hindal, heedless of danger to his life, rushed alone to counter a sudden night-attack by the enemy. A bow and a quiver half-full of arrows were the only weapons he carried. It was, therefore, not surprising that he was overpowered and killed before other generals could come to his rescue. In a fierce battle that raged for nearly four hours, the loss of men on both sides was heavy. Though the invaders were repulsed, Humayun was disconsolate at the death of his brother, and ordered a halt to hostilities for the forty-day period of mourning.

Ghazni, the fief of Mirza Hindal, was assigned to Akbar, and to underline his regard for and oneness with the brother who was no more, the Mirza's daughter was betrothed to the prince. Financial arrangements for the maintenance of Hindal's family were made on a scale that reflected the Emperor's concern at his passing away. One of the biggest palaces inside the fort was assigned to the family, and the Comptroller of the Household was ordered to extend to them facilities and courtesies on par with those extended to the family of the Padshah himself.

Akbar was a frequent visitor to his aunt's house, and often spent

hours there listening to her stories about the deeds of bravery of his uncle and other members of the family. War, with all its perils, fascinated the prince. So did the acts of courage which, as he himself elaborated in later years, brought out the best in man.

His love for camels, horses, hunting dogs and cheetas reflected the courage he was endowed with. Outdoor sport fascinated him, so much so that he came to regard the discipline of a classroom as an exercise in the suppression of the real self. Humayun once reminded him in strong words of the part academic studies played in the make-up of a prince, but the remonstrance bore no result. Akbar was not interested in courses that led only to what he called vague intellectual egotism. In his letter of admonition, Humayun had quoted a verse of Shaikh Nizami:

Sit not idle, it's not the time for play.  
It's the time for arts and for work.

Akbar ignored the advice, and continued to spend his time testing his strength and courage against animals known for the sharpness of their tooth and claw. Several famed teachers—including Muila Isamuddin, Maulana Bayazid, Mulla Abdul Qadir and Mullazada Mulla—tried in turn to engage the prince in the study of literature and science, but without success. In the end, Humayun, in the words of Abul Fazl, "realised the futility of imparting external knowledge to one endowed with inner knowledge of the rarest kind." In other words, the Emperor despaired, and took no further notice of the complaints made to him by Akbar's teachers.

Keen to strengthen Mughal unity through matrimonial alliances, Humayun betrothed his daughter Bakhshi Banu\* to Ibrahim Mirza, son of Sulaiman Mirza of Badakhshan.

Early in 1552, Humayun launched a three-pronged attack on the positions held by Kamran's Afghan supporters, defeated them in a series of closely fought battles, and forced the Mirza to flee across the Indus to Hindustan. This time, Kamran did not ask his father-in-law Shah Hussain Beg for help, but chose instead to seek an alliance with Salim Shah Sur. He hoped the Afghan ruler would welcome him as an enemy of his worst foe.

\*Bakhshi Banu was one year older than her step-brother. She was the daughter of Ganwar Bibi.

Kamran's hopes were, however, doomed to be dashed to the ground. His reception at the court of Salim was cold. The Afghan autocrat, who was encamped at the bank of the river Chenab after crushing the revolt of the Niazis, not only did not hold any promise of help; he made no secret of treating the Mirza as a prisoner, and using him to thwart Humayun's plans to stage a comeback. Apprehending danger to his life, Kamran escaped in the guise of a woman, and sought refuge in the Gakkar territory ruled by Sultan Adam. The latter received him with courtesy but not wanting to be involved in what he considered the internal affairs of the Mughals, invited Humayun to take charge of the Mirza. The Emperor moved out of Kabul, accompanied by Akbar, at the head of a fairly large army, and was received by the Sultan at the caravan post of Pirhala. The latter brought with him a petition for mercy from Kamran, but Humayun turned it down. At the insistence of his *amirs*, Humayun ordered the Mirza to be blinded—a punishment he well deserved not only because of his repeated acts of treacherous disloyalty against the Emperor himself, but because of the heartless atrocities to which Humayun's supporters and their families had been subjected to during his three-time occupation of Kabul.

Kamran put up with his ordeal heroically, not uttering a groan while his eyes were lanced fifty times. It was only towards the end when lemon-juice with salt was squeezed into the bleeding sockets of his sightless eyes that he appealed to God to spare him further pain.

The Mirza's request for permission to spend the remaining years of his life in Mecca was readily granted. Akbar was present when a day later Humayun received Kamran to bid him farewell. The meeting was charged with high emotion. Both Humayun and Akbar burst into tears when the Mirza recited two couplets of a famous Persian poem to express his resignation to the fate that had befallen him. The Mirza, however, kept his calm, and did not betray the storm of anguish raging within him till after the Emperor had left. Then he was disconsolate, and cried aloud for hours to bemoan the turn destiny had taken.

Not wanting to pass through the territories over which he once ruled, Kamran went to Arabia via Sind. His father-in-law, Shah Hussian Arghun, comforted him and loaded him with gifts of day-to-day utility. However, he was not in favour of his daughter,

Chuchak Begum, accompanying Kamran to Mecca. Firm in her loyalty, the Begum insisted that she considered it her duty to stand by her husband in the days of adversity. Despite the protestations of her father, she boarded the ship which was to carry Kamran to Mecca.

The Mirza died on 5 October 1557. Even after his passing away, Chuchak did not return to Sind. She preferred to spend the remaining years of her life in the same house in which she shared with her husband the rigours of an exile bereft of all hope. To this day in Sind, her name is synonymous with faithfulness.

The punishment meted out to Kamran left an indelible mark on Akbar's mind. At first distraught, he soon came to realize that the considerations of humanity did not always correspond with the obligations of kingship. On their way back to Kabul the *ulema* in the camp were at pains to explain to the prince the duties of a ruler; they impressed on him that the Emperor had no alternative but no accept the advice of his counsellors and render Kamran incapable of perpetrating again the type of hideous barbarities he committed while in power. Many excerpts from religious and philosophical treatises were quoted to prove that leniency to a criminal is injustice to the peaceful, law-abiding citizen. This was Akbar's first introduction to the complexities of the right and wrong which were to engage his attention in later years. He did not accept without questioning the norms and values recommended by the ancients. Lengthy debates were held to establish the reasonableness of every dictum. Even Humayun himself participated in examining from all angles the correctness or otherwise of a proposition. At times, Akbar astounded the learned exponents with his remarks. It became clear that his mind transcended the finite, and that he tended to interpret all laws in the light of a universal spirit which, he believed, controlled the affairs of man. Humayun was at times delighted with his son's logic, and encouraged him to seek elaborations before approving or disapproving a traditional command. Akbar, who was now thirteen, brought to bear a remarkable flexibility in making his assessments. No precept was sacrosanct to him until all doubts were cleared and apprehensions allayed. Endowed with a prodigious memory, he often caught the *ulema* affirming a premise which they had earlier rejected or vice versa.

Humayun was now in a relaxed frame of mind. The one big

thorn in his flesh had been removed. There were no more Kam-rans to be faced on return to Kabul. The path for the reconquest of the empire he had lost to Sher Shah lay clear before him.

The leisurely march back to Kabul gave Humayun an opportunity to test the intellectual potential of his son; also it enabled the young prince to establish a man-to-man equation with his father. The comparative informality of camp life broke many a barrier between the two. Whereas Akbar came to respect Humayun for his liberalism, the latter imbibed an admiration for the manner in which his son used reason to shed outdated ideas. The camp in fact became a bridge which brought the father and son nearer each other. Henceforth, Akbar was not to be treated as a child under training to don one day the mantle of kingship, but as an heir-apparent the maturity of whose opinions was beyond question. The boy prince was now a man ready to take the field by the side of his father for the reconquest of Hindustan.

## Called to the Throne

Kabul hummed with activity during 1553-54. There was an air of expectancy all around. Preparations for an invasion of Hindustan were being made at all levels. Troops poured in the capital from all dependent territories. Military camps sprang up at nearly every vacant place in the neighbourhood of Kabul. Merchants brought in huge stocks of foodgrains for the daily increasing imperial army. Traders stepped up their operations to meet demands for equipment and other essential requirements of an expeditionary force.

This was a hectic period of preparation in which Akbar's role was not insignificant. Humayun sent him occasionally to inspect the camps, and report to him on such administrative shortfalls as might catch his eye. Akbar was a keen observer of men, and he did not spare anybody who he thought was a misfit in the high-power force that was gradually taking shape. His recommendations were invariably precise and practicable. Humayun listened to him with considerable attention, thus infusing in the young commander not only self-confidence but also a sense of responsibility considered essential for development of his military genius. Once when Akbar brought to the notice of his father the failure of a camp commandant to make available to men under his charge the prescribed quantity of corn, pulses and meat, the Emperor not only suspended the officer but also issued a *firman* that in future a lapse of that nature would be considered an offence punishable with death. To Akbar, the comfort of the soldier came

first, and he repeatedly urged the officers at every level not to spare any effort to make the troops happy. This solicitude for the welfare of the fighting man proved to be the key of his spectacular war successes in later years.

Humayun spent the summer of 1554 in Qandhar. His return to Kabul in October was a signal that everything was set for the planned march to Hindustan. Bairam Khan joined him shortly afterwards. The Khan, who had been given in Qandhar the title of Khan-i-Khanan, commanded respect for his unflinching loyalty. His presence in Kabul was a shot in arm of nearly thirty thousand troops assembled there. Akbar admired the Khan as he did no other general. His courage, loyalty and singleness of purpose were the three pillars on which rested the morale of the expeditionary force. The prince often talked to him about organizational and other connected matters. It became clear to Bairam that Akbar was no ordinary prince; the Khan saw in him the making of a great general and a popular monarch.

One day when the Emperor was resting following a strenuous chase in a hunt lasting several hours, the Khan told him:

Your Majesty, I am wonder-struck at the precocity of the *Wali Ahaad*. Though young in years, he possesses the wisdom of Solomon and courage of Alexander. In the camp, the prince conducts himself with the poise of a veteran general. His observations are uncanny, and seldom does he fail to admonish inefficiency and recognize merit. Even the most complex subtleties of strategy are not lost upon him. The prince, it seems, is blessed with many a hidden eye with which he scans the secrets of man and nature. May the Almighty preserve him for ever. I have no doubt that he is destined to reach the heights of greatness seldom scaled before. A place of honour and responsibility need to be given him in the expedition at hand. He is the shadow of God on earth. With him in the van, the outcome of the campaign will never be in doubt.

Bairam's appraisal confirmed Humayun in his belief that Akbar was an instrument of Divine will and power, and that he had been sent to earth for the realization of a purpose bigger than mere victories on the battlefield.

Fortified thus against doubts and apprehensions expressed



sometimes by his *begs*, Humayun appointed his infant son, Muhammad Hakim,\* to be the nominal Governor of Kabul with the ever-faithful Munim Khan in actual control of administration, and started with fanfare on his quest for the lost empire.

On 15 December 1554, the imperial army crossed the Indus. Humayun was pleasantly surprised to find that in the plains of northern Punjab the Afghan resistance was conspicuous by its absence. The power vacuum resulting after the death in October 1553, of Sher Shah's son, Salim Shah, had not yet been filled. From Bengal to the Punjab, the once homogeneous state was a picture of bewildering confusion. The struggle for succession paralyzed not only administration but also the Afghan will to present a united front to the common enemy.\*\*

First the Jhelum, and then the Chenab were crossed by the Mughal army without meeting any armed opposition. It was unbelievable that an invading force reached the heart of the strategically important Punjab without firing a shot. "Delhi is now ours," declared Humayun as he reached Kalanaur, a junction from where one road led to Agra and the other to Lahore. Quickly dividing the army into two self-contained fighting units, he sent Bairam Khan to subdue Jullunder and Sirhind, and deputed Shah Abul Ma'ali\*\*\* to capture Lahore. Both the generals found their respective tasks easier than expected, especially so Abul Ma'ali who took the capital of Punjab in just over a week. The population welcomed him with an unusual show of enthusiasm. In the Mughal comeback, they saw an end to the state of lawlessness that made life a nightmare. Humayun himself followed Abul Ma'ali, and entered Lahore on 25 February 1555, with all the majesty of a central Asian conqueror. Akbar rode by his father's side when the royal party made its way to the main mosque for thanksgiving prayers. A picture of regal poise and power, the young prince remained in the centre of celebrations that followed.

\*Muhammad Hakim was the son of Mah-Chuchak Begum.

\*\*The rule of Adil Shah was confined only to provinces east of the Ganges. Delhi and the Doab were under Ibrahim Sur. Sikander Shah took Punjab. Muhammad Khan Sur declared himself independent in Bengal, and Daulat Khan became the ruler of Malwa.

\*\*\*Abul Ma'ali, a handsome general of great talents, belonged to the celebrated family of the Sayids of Tabriz. A favourite of the Emperor, Humayun often addressed him as "my son."

This was his first contact with the city from where he was to rule Hindustan for nearly two decades. The local chiefs who came to pay homage to the Emperor also pledged their loyalty to Akbar.

The festivities lasted as customary for eleven days. Proclamation of a general amnesty was a gift to the population given at the instance of Akbar. Humayun also forbade his soldiers from indulging their lust for plunder, and compensated them by gifts of money according to their rank. The Mughal popularity in Lahore and neighbouring territories was, to some extent, a reaction to the excesses committed by the Afghans. The latter were now entrenched at Dipalpur under the command of Shahbaz Khan, and were planning to march to the capital in a bid to dislodge the invaders. Humayun acted quickly. He sent Abul Ma'ali to engage the Afghans as far away from the capital as possible. Though outnumbered by one to two, the Mughals scored a spectacular victory, due principally to a do-or-die, last-minute assault by Abul Ma'ali himself. Humayun did the Saiyadzada high honour by giving him a seat next to himself at the victory banquet while Akbar had to sit separately at another *dastarkhwan*. The prince, notwithstanding his age, was too sensitive to remain indifferent to this breach of protocol, and instantly became jealous of the Shah's close relationship with the Emperor. Little did Abul Ma'ali know that the honour done to him was to be the beginning of his downfall.

In the meantime, Bairam Khan scored a spectacular victory against the Afghan general Nasib Khan and captured Sirhind. Sikandar Sur was taken aback at this unforeseen development and rushed reinforcements under Tatar Khan to check the Mughal advance. However, Bairam's daring crippled the much larger enemy force; he crossed the Beas at midnight and repulsed Tatar Khan with heavy losses. Hissar fell to him without further resistance. Sikandar was alarmed. He mustered every Afghan soldier for the last-ditch stand and, according to Abul Fazl, he raised an army of eighty thousand fighting men, and took his position at a distance of less than ten miles from where the Mughal army was camped. Bairam, who had no more than eight thousand men under his command, realized the danger of his numerical disadvantage, and sent urgent messages to Humayun for reinforcements. The latter, who was laid low with colic, responded by sending ten thousand men under Akbar's command, and promised to take the field himself as soon as he was fit enough to travel. The arrival of

Akbar was a morale booster for Bairam's small force, and they prepared to engage the enemy, if need be, before the Emperor showed up. However, Humayun was not long in coming, and took the overall command in his own hands. For forty-seven days, the two armies lay face to face, waiting for an opportunity to launch the offensive. The death of Kalapahar, brother of Sikandar, in a skirmish infuriated the Afghans, and they decided to throw caution aside and try to knock out the Mughals by the sheer weight of numbers.

The battle was joined on 22 June 1555. In a fierce engagement made famous by the high-powered valour of Bairam Khan and Shah Abul Ma'ali, forty thousand Afghans lay dead within a short span of half a day. The announcement of victory was made in the name of Akbar—a subtle move by Humayun to save himself the embarrassment of naming either Bairam or Abul Ma'ali for the honour. Jealousy between the two was the talk of the camp, and Humayun at this stage could not contemplate displeasing either. It was the first time he used his son for a political end. No one objected to the Emperor's choice. In fact, both Bairam and Abul Ma'ali hailed the decision as just recognition of the prince's merit and influence on the course of the battle.

Akbar, who was now nearly thirteen years old, had played not an insignificant role in the engagement at Sirhind. According to Abul Fazl, his presence on the battlefield was an inspiration for all ranks of the army, and the display of heroic deeds by Bairam and Abul Ma'ali was only a reflection of their trust in the good fortune of the *Wali Ahaad*. With Akbar on their side, the generals believed, the outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion. Throughout the engagement, Akbar rode by the side of his father on a chestnut *tipchak* horse. A picture of self-confidence, he was on that historic day, in the words of Bayazid, "a symbol of God's will and a lustrous image of the fighting qualities that made Amir Timur invincible." Everyone drew courage from his royal poise, and it was he who was the recipient of felicitations from the generals when the victory drums were beaten. Even Humayun looked upon him as the harbinger of success that attended his arms. So when he formally ascribed the triumph to him, there were no voices of dissent. Twenty-nine years earlier; Babar had commemorated the victory at Panipat by putting up a pyramid of human skulls at the spot where he stood when Humayun conveyed

to him the news of the death of Sultan Ibrahim. Sirhind was of no less significance than Panipat. Humayun emulated his father when he ordered the heads of forty thousand Afghans that lay dead on the battlefield to be chopped off and to use them as bricks to raise a victory memorial. The place chosen for this grim structure was the one where Akbar stood when Abul Ma'ali brought the report that Sikandar Sur had fled. This was the prince's first taste of blood. He was in his element. War, more than victory, brought out the best in his makeup. To live dangerously was, to Akbar, a means of self-realization. In his code of values, passivity was a negation that illaccorded human nature.

Humayun, like Babar, believed in the moral law of retribution. At the start of the expedition to reconquer Hindustan, he renounced the eating of animal flesh. Here was an act of surrender to enlist on his side the help of God. Babar's renunciation of liquor before Kanwaha was also in the nature of a petition to Allah for mercy. Both had drunk deep at the waters of sufism, and to them self-sacrifice was the surest way to placate supernatural powers. To renounce, according to them, was to achieve, and to possess was nothing but the beginning of losing. Humayun kept his pledge till victory came to him at Sirhind. When on the day following the defeat of Sikandar an antelope was killed by Akbar with one fierce blow of his sword, Humayun thought it was time to break his promise to Allah. He ordered a piece of the flesh of the animal to be cooked for his meal. In Akbar's feat he saw a divine invitation to resume his normal eating habits. His renunciation had been rewarded with victory. The road to Deihi now lay clear before him.

As was customary in medieval India, Humayun distributed the reacquired territories as fiefs among his top officials. Administrative convenience, as also perhaps efficiency, warranted that step. The strategically important district of Hissar and its neighbourhood was given to Akbar—a dispensation that won the approval of all the generals. Bairam Khan was presented with Sirhind and various other *parganas*. Tardi Beg Khan, a loyal Turkoman officer, was sent to Mewant, Sikander Khan to Agra, Ali Quli Khan to Sambhal and Haidar Muhammad Khan to Biana.

Humayun himself entered Delhi on 23 July 1555, thus ending a fifteen-year period of exile. The *fatwa* was read in his name the same day. Akbar accompanied his father to the royal mosque for

thanks giving prayers. As at Lahore, a general amnesty was declared, and the population was saved the agony of having to suffer a burst of plunder. According to Abul Fazl, it was Akbar who prevailed upon his father to restrain his men from going on the rampage. Empires, he is reported to have told Humayun, were built on goodwill and not on fire and brimstone. His political acumen was sharp and long-ranged. The Emperor respected his views.

The transfer from Afghan to Mughal rule was remarkably smooth. Humayun showed balanced statesmanship inasmuch as he did not disturb the administrative innovations introduced by Sher Shah. Bairam Khan, who was the Emperor's adviser number one realized early the virtues of continuity; the Mughal hold was yet far from firm to permit radical changes in the pattern of governance. Soon he was proved to be correct.

The news of unrest in the Punjab was too disquieting to be ignored. The arrogance of Shah Abul Ma'ali was a red rag to the population who, in a series of communications to Delhi, demanded his replacement by someone more sympathetic to their welfare. Here was an opportunity for Bairam to cut the haughty Saiyadzada to size,\* and he advised the Emperor to entrust that key province to no other than Akbar. Humayun agreed, but on condition that the Khan himself accompanied the prince as his *atalique* (teacher-cum-adviser). Though at first reluctant, Bairam accepted the assignment with all its challenges and opportunities. It was in November 1555, that Akbar left Delhi, at the head of a sizable expeditionary force, to take charge of his new post. Bairam apprehended that Abul Ma'ali might rebel and try to retain by force the province for himself. His fears, however, proved unfounded.

At the instance of his guardian, Akbar addressed a letter to Abul Ma'ali after reaching Sirhind:

As already communicated to you through a royal '*firman*', the Emperor has appointed me to take charge of the province of Punjab. Accompanied by Khan-i-Khanan, I am now on way to Lahore. The Emperor desires that you should vacate your charge and present yourself at the court without delay. Suitable

\*Some historians, in particular Abdul Qadir Badouni, are of view that the reports against Shah Abul Ma'ali were inspired by Bairam Khan himself. There is no way to check the truth of this allegation.

arrangements should be made to safeguard peace during the interim period. Any attempt by disloyal elements to create confusion should be dealt with severely. We are concerned that Sultan Sikandar is still at large. He is reported to be hiding somewhere in the hills of Punjab. My first task on reaching Lahore would be to launch an all-out hunt for the elusive Afghan. All officers under you may be apprised of this decision. They should hold themselves in readiness for the offensive. I would be glad to be kept informed of reports you may have in your possession about the whereabouts of the Sultan. The Khan-i-Khanan considers this to be of the highest importance. We have no doubt you will carry these instructions faithfully.

Abul Ma'ali was taken aback at the tone of this communication. He knew instinctively that his ouster was part of a conspiracy to defame him. At first he thought of staging a rebellion, but in the end saner counsels prevailed. He left Lahore to welcome the prince at Sultanpur. Akbar received him with courtesy due to a senior general; no more. At the banquet in his honour, a separate *dastarkhwan* was spread for him strictly in accordance with the requirements of protocol. Bairam Khan was seated above him. This hurt Abul Ma'ali's pride. He sat through the evening proceedings without uttering a word. On retiring to his camp, he sent a letter to the prince.

I am hurt beyond words. Your Highness is well aware of the esteem in which I am held by His Majesty the Emperor. At the banquet held in my honour at Lahore, he gave me a seat by his side while a separate *dastarkhwan* was spread for you. The humiliation inflicted upon me last night in the presence of *amirs* much junior to my rank saddened my heart. The treatment meted out to me, I submit, was unkind. My services to you and your *Walid-i-Buzargwar* (respected father) have been marked by unwavering devotion and loyalty. I would, therefore, request Your Highness to let me know the indiscretions I may have unwittingly committed to deserve a fall from grace. I take this opportunity to assure Your Highness of my loyalty till the day of resurrection.

Akbar was offended at the overbearing tone of Abul Ma'ali's repre-

sentation. At the instance of Bairam Khan, he sent him a brief note at the hands of Haji Muhammed Sistani:

Your representation has been considered. I find little substance therein. You will agree that a line has to be drawn between the laws of the state and personal equations. Anyway, my relations with you stand on a footing different from that of the Emperor. The rules of precedence were strictly adhered to at the banquet. You should have had no cause for offence. This view is fully shared by the Khan-i-Khanan.

Abul Ma'ali swallowed the reprimand tamely. There was nothing he could do to seek redress of his grievance. Akbar, he realized, was in no mood to listen to his complaint. The influence of Bairam Khan was a barrier he could not hope to break.

Soon after reaching Lahore, Akbar launched a three-pronged probing assault on positions known to be held by Sultan Sikandar. Accompanied by Bairam Khan, he himself established a camp at Kalanaur; fifteen miles from Gurdaspur, from where roads branched off in different directions. His plan was to rush reinforcements to any place where fighting against the remnants of the Afghan army might flare up. Little did he know that at this very time events were taking place in Delhi which were to force him to change his military plans.

On 24 January 1556, Humayun while descending the steep steps of his library at Din-Pannah, six miles from Delhi, slipped and rolled down the stairs, falling headlong on the ground. After remaining unconscious for two days, he breathed his last on 26 January. For fear of uprising, the death was kept a closely guarded secret for seventeen days during which period contingents of the Mughal army were placed at all vulnerable points.

The news of the passing away of the Emperor was sent to Akbar at Kalanaur through Shaikh Nasir Quli, a courtier of distinction and long standing. Akbar was dumbfounded at this sudden development, and tended to favour immediate return to Delhi. But Bairam Khan thought otherwise. In his opinion, it was unsafe to leave Punjab unguarded. Sultan Sikandar was still at large. It was certain Sikandar would make a desperate bid to come back once it was known that there was a power vacuum in the province. The situation was fraught with graver possibilities. One wrong step could

have led to neutralization of all gains since the victory at Sirhind. In this crisis, Bairam Khan stood firm like rock. Averse to taking chances, he decided to move step by step first to consolidate his position in the Punjab and then to turn eastwards to liquidate the centres of resistance that might spring up around Delhi and its neighbourhood.

On 14 February 1556, Akbar was crowned Emperor on an improvised wood-and-brick throne at Kalanaur.\* The insignia of sovereignty had been sent to Akbar from Delhi by Tardi Beg Khan. The coronation ceremony of a king destined to be classed among the great monarchs of the world was as devoid of pageantry as was his birth fourteen years earlier in the desert palace of Amarkot. In the meantime, it was announced in Delhi that Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar had ascended the throne, and that all was quiet throughout the length and breadth of the empire.

There are moments in history when time seems to run backwards. The death of Humayun was one such point in the annals of the Mughals. It was only six months earlier that he reoccupied Delhi after an exile of fifteen long years. Though defeated, Afghans were still a force to be reckoned with. Disunity was their greatest handicap. Given the right type of leadership, they were in a position to harass and roll back the Mughal army across the Indus. The Rajputs too were uneasy at the thought that an alien power had come back to reoccupy the throne at Delhi for a second term. The bulk of the people were apathetic as to who ruled them. The memory of reforms introduced by Sher Shah was, however, still fresh in their minds. The welfare schemes initiated by him weighed heavily against ready acceptance of the Mughal rule. It is true the successors of Sher Shah were self-seeking autocrats indifferent to the good of the people. But there was no guarantee that the progeny of Babar would do better. The sudden disappearance of Humayun from the scene made the prevailing uncertainties more uncertain. Akbar was only a lad of fourteen when he was called to the throne. His potentials were still to be tested. In the circumstances, the pulse of Hindustan beat a little quicker as various claimants to the throne prepared for yet another round of warfare. On the face

\*The throne at Kalanaur was eighteen feet long and three feet high. It is now a protected monument.



of it, the odds were against the Mughals. However, the gods were on their side. Time did not slide backwards. Rather, it took a leap forward making Akbar's ascent to the throne a landmark in the history of the Orient.

## Hemu Loses His Life and Battle of Panipat

The coronation ceremony at Kalanaur signified no more than the preferment of a claim—one amongst many—for the throne of Delhi. Humayun's victory at Sirhind, though decisive, had not been consolidated by the time he fell to his death down the stairs of his library at Din-Pannah. Sikandar Sur was still at large, hiding somewhere amidst the lofty labyrinth of the Siwalik hills. There were several other claimants to the empire which, not long ago, formed a comparatively homogeneous unit under Sher Shah and later under his son Islam Shah.

It was, therefore, only to be expected that the Afghan governors of some principalities should aspire to seize the vacant throne. A majority of them were close relatives of Sher Shah. The strength of their arms was buttressed by the rights of heredity. Akbar's right was perhaps stronger. He was the legal heir of the last occupant of the throne. But in those days it was the might of arms that decided successions, and Akbar's right on that account was a big question mark. His force was small. A bigger handicap was that he was three hundred miles away from Delhi. Two rivers and many powerful rivals barred his way to the capital. One wrong step, his advisers feared, could write finis to Mughal aspirations. Caution was the crying need of the time. Bairam Khan's responsibility was heavy. He stood firm and faithful in circumstances which might have sent a lesser man hurtling down the deeps of

despair. But for his courage and loyalty, as also circumspection, the history of India might have taken a different course.

Unity was the basic necessity upon which could rest the hope of a final victory. To that end, Bairam first bent his energies. Shah Abul Ma'ali was a thorn in his flesh. The Sayidzada was still chafing at his ouster from Punjab. He did not make an appearance at the coronation ceremony. Neither did he send a message of submission and felicitations. Bairam considered him a danger to Mughal oneness. With the concurrence of Akbar, he sent to the Shah a letter reminding him of his obligations and, at the same time, inviting him to attend the coronation *darbar*,\* at which all loyal chieftains were expected to make their obeisance to the young Emperor. Abul Ma'ali at first expressed his inability to come as, he said, he was in mourning at the death of Humayun, but later offered to present himself on condition that a place of honour was given to him at the assembly. Bairam agreed readily. A seat to the immediate right of Akbar was reserved for him. Abul Ma'ali was received by Bairam Khan and later by the Emperor himself with unusual show of courtesy. Honours and gifts were bestowed upon him to underline the irrelevance of the past in the context of the tasks that lay ahead. The Shah's fears were allayed, and he came to the banquet that evening unattended by his bodyguard. Bairam's plans were laid well in advance with his characteristic care for detail. A select band of his officers pounced upon the Shah as he was about to wash his hands before the meal was served, chained him, and sent him as a prisoner to Lahore. The arrest of Abul Ma'ali was a warning to all those who might have been harbouring treacherous plans. Though Akbar at this stage was only a passive spectator of the events taking place around him, he expressed in no uncertain terms his pleasure over the incarceration of one whom he described in later years as a "vain self-seeking careerist who did not know where his interest lay."

Abul Ma'ali escaped from prison in Lahore and, following a series of abortive adventures, he made his appearance in Kabul in 1561 in a bid to find favour with the strong-headed Mahchuchak Begum. His affirmations of loyalty impressed the Begum who not

\*The coronation '*darbar*' was held on 17 February 1556, i.e., three days after Akbar's ascension to the throne.

only made him her first *wazir*, but also gave him her daughter Fakhr-un-Nissa in marriage. Unbounded ambition once again proved to be the Shah's worst enemy. He soon fomented a rebellion against the Begum, killed her with his own hand, and sought the help of some tribal malcontents to oust Muhammad Hakim\* from the throne. The loyal supporters of the latter, however, got the better of Abul Ma'ali with the help of the powerful Haram Begum\*\* of Badakhshan, and had him strangled to death in the full gaze of a packed court—a gruesome end to a career that seemed full of promise after Humayun's victory at Sirhind.

In June, the Mughal army moved to Jullundur, the object being to strengthen its hold over Punjab before coming to grips with Afghans in the east. This was a testing time for Bairam Khan. He had assumed the role of *Vakil-i-Sultanat* (Prime Minister) and was in full control of administrative and military operations. The news from the western wing of the empire was none too assuring. In Badakhshan, Sulaiman Mirza\*\*\* had all but proclaimed himself independent; the Kabul territory, from the Hindukush to Sind, was in turmoil, the regent Munim Khan having alienated a number of tribal chiefs through indiscreet use of strong-arm tactics; Qandhar, the fief of Bairam Khan himself, was too in a state of ferment, the Governor Shah Muhammad failing to withstand the continuing Uzbek pressure. Several courtiers favoured a tactical retreat to Kabul for consolidation of the western territories, but Bairam was firm against giving up the empire of Hindustan without a fight. For five months, the Mughal forces strained at the leash at Jullundur, waiting for an opportunity to singe the Afghan beard in the latter's own den. Bairam however, chose to play a waiting game; he hoped the Afghans would fight among themselves to the point of exhaustion and thus leave the road to Delhi clear for the Mughal advance. His calculations, though realistic, did not take into reckoning the speed with which Hemu, the Hindu general of

\*Muhammad Hakim was the son of Machuchak Begum and Humayun. He was appointed nominal Governor of Kabul when the latter embarked on the reconquest of Hindustan in November 1554. He was at that time only three years old.

\*\*Haram Begum was the wife of Sulaiman Mirza, a cousin of Humayun.

\*\*\*Sulaiman Mirza was the great grandson of Abu Said Mirza, grandfather of Babar. His father Khan Mirza was the son of Sultan Mahmud, son of Abu Said Mirza.

Muhammad Shah Adil, moved from Oudh to oust the Mughal Governor Tardi Beg from Agra and Delhi. The news of the fall of Agra was too disconcerting to be taken lying down. Like most great generals, Bairam was a gambler; he took courage in both his hands and ordered the 12,000 men under his command to march quickly towards Thanesar. His plan was to engage the enemy at Panipat where, thirty years earlier, Babar inflicted a crushing defeat upon Sultan Ibrahim Sur to establish Mughal rule in Hindustan.

A military genius, Hemu was riding high on a wave of spectacular successes on the battlefield. For his master Adil Shah he won no less than twenty-two victories without suffering a single reverse. His reputation as a soldier of fortune had spread far and wide. Though small in stature and almost ugly in appearance, his boundless courage struck terror in the hearts of his adversaries. He was too frail to be able to ride a horse; instead, he conducted his campaigns from the back of an elephant. He never girdled a sword; neither did he ever sling a bow over his shoulder. Audacious daring and the ability to inspire his men to deeds of death-defying valour were his weapons. Self-confidence and trust in God were the facets of his personality which impressed even Abul Fazl. The latter deployed the most scurrilous adjective to decry his low origin and the manner in which he rose from the position of a lowly shopkeeper to the post of Prime Minister under Adil, but when it came to assessing his talents as a leader, Abul Fazl clicked his heels and saluted deferentially: "Certainly, he was a most excellent warrior-statesman, and he had a lofty spirit." Hemu was no mean team-captain. Seldom did he ask his men to do anything which he was not prepared to do himself. Always in the thick of a battle, he invariably carried the day through sheer will-power and absence of fear in his heart. In addition, he was an organizer of rare ability. Personal attention to minute detail was to him a command of God, an obligation that no leader could ignore except at his own peril. He practised this highly pragmatic principle right from the day he entered the service of the Afghans under Islam Shah. His first important post was that of Superintendent of Bazars, an assignment carrying duties more diverse than that of a modern Municipal Commissioner. He worked hard and for long hours every day to streamline the administration of the cities under his charge.

Gradually, Hemu rose to be *Vakil-i-Aalah* (Prime Minister) under the profligate Adil Shah who usurped the throne after murdering the twelve-year-old Firoz Khan, son of Islam Shah. Adil, whose original name was Mobraiz Khan, was the son of Nizam Khan Sur, younger brother of Sher Shah. The Afghan courtiers resented the rise to supreme authority of one whom they considered a Hindu heretic born in the slums of Riwar. Dissatisfaction rose on all sides, but the fun-loving Adil stuck firmly to his decision. In Hemu, he found first a minister who could checkmate and nip in the bud the evil designs of self-seeking, ambitious careerists, and thus give him leisure to indulge his lust for sensual pleasures. Adil's first love was music; he attained high proficiency in this art, and claimed among his disciples the immortal Tansen and Baz Bahadur. The affairs of the state were of little interest to him. For days he would seclude himself in the company of famed musicians and fair dancers, and come out of his pleasure-house only when the fires of the flesh died down temporarily. Adil's many-sided personality was a curious mixture of diverse and conflicting traits. A continuing search after pleasure, unpredictable displays of generosity, an almost barbaric lust for blood-letting, and occasional shows of solicitude for the poor—these were some of the facets of a complex character that baffled historians. Not infrequently he would come out of his palace riding a horse with all-gold appurtenances, and shoot golden arrows over the heads of people gathered to greet him. The lucky ones in whose houses arrows happened to fall were expected to bring them in person to the palace and receive in return an amount of money ten times their gold value. For a monarch of such whims, Hemu was an asset. The latter not only kept the ship of Adil's domains on an even keel; he also added to the Sultan's fame by scoring for him spectacular victories on the battlefield. Hemu was well aware of his own weaknesses. To offset them, he resorted frequently to deeds of munificence that dazzled both Hindus and Muslims. It was, therefore, not surprising that hostility to him subsided gradually, and he became a symbol of unity between the rich and the poor and also among the people of different religions. Thus the rejoicings were great when he adduced to himself first the title of Basant Rai and later of Vikramajit, and staked a claim to the throne he had kept intact for so long on behalf of Adil.

Hemu's army comprised five thousand war elephants and fifty

thousand horses when he marched out of Agra to give battle to the Mughals. In addition, he had at his command a large squad of artillery which he sent in advance towards Panipat. The famed gunners Mubarak Khan and Mahabit Khan were in charge of this force. As luck would have it, these heroes of many wars were taken unawares by an advance column of the Mughal army and killed along with nearly two thousand men. A large number of big and small-size guns fell into Mughal hands. This was a haul that cheered Bairam Khan. A grievous blow to the enemy had been struck, but Hemu was undaunted by this reverse. He regarded the elephant and not the gun as the decisive factor in a battle. The five thousand well-trained and well-fed war elephants he had on his side were his trump card, and he planned to hurl this mass of ferocity in the fray as soon as the battle was joined. Hemu himself rode on Hawai, an animal so strong that, according to Abul Fazl, it could "hurl a mountain to the sky with a gentle flick of his trunk." Other famous elephants like Ghalib Jang, Gaj Bahadur, Jor Bhayan, Fauj Madar and Kali Beg were assigned to high-ranking officers. Confident of crushing the Mughal force, estimated at twelve thousand men, under the feet of his elephants, Hemu threw caution to the winds, and launched an offensive as soon as contact was established between the advance guards of the two armies. Another history-making battle raged on the plain of Panipat on Thursday, 5 November 1556. The left and right wings of the Mughal force wilted dangerously under relentless pressure by Hemu's generals, prominent among whom was his sister's son Ramaya. Then came a bolt from the blue that dramatically changed the fortunes. An arrow struck Hemu in the eye and came out from the back of his head. Writhing in pain, he collapsed inside the *howdah*. Panic gripped the Afghans. News spread quickly that Hemu was dead. In vain did the leaderless troops strain their eyes to allay their worst fears. Dispirited, they broke formations and fled. In the resultant confusion, Hawai, with its precious load still on its back, ran away. A band of Mughal horsemen, led by Shah Quli, gave chase, and succeeded in prevailing upon the mahout to bring the animal to a halt. Hemu was taken prisoner. The rest of the story is best told in the words of Abul Fazl:

While everyone of the heroes was being brought into the presence and was receiving rewards temporal and spiritual, Shah

Quli Khan brought in Hemu bound. Though they questioned him, he made no reply. Perhaps he was unable to speak, or he was overwhelmed by shame and not inclined to say anything. Bairam Khan begged His Majesty the Shahinshah to slay with his own sacred hand this stock of sedition. That Lord of wisdom and master of sages, who regarded his youth as the veil of his divinely-bestowed wisdom, replied in words that were the interpretation of truth and were for the instruction of the wise that his holy spirit did not permit him to slay a captive, and that it seemed to him that in the justice-hall of the only One there was nothing meritorious in such an act. Though simple loyalists importuned him and pressed him, the Shahinshah showed himself more averse to the proceeding. At last, Bairam Khan, when he perceived that His Majesty was not inclined to accept his request, withdrew from the attempt, and under the influence of hereditary beliefs which take their place in men from imitation of their fathers and teachers, himself became engaged in the acquisition of this fancied merit and with his sword cleansed the world of the contamination of his existence.

This was the end of Hemu—an ignoble finish to a career that for nearly ten years was the envy of all. Hemu's head was sent to Kabul and his trunk was hung outside one of the gates of Delhi. There is a conflict of opinion as to who actually severed his head: Bairam or Akbar? Abdul Qadir Badaouni and some others assert that it was Akbar himself who did the foul act. Vincent Smith agrees with this view. For reasons not difficult to guess, Abul Fazl, it is pointed out, created the myth of Akbar's refusal to comply with his tutor's request.

Akbar, at fourteen, was a trigger-happy young man unobsessed by considerations of conscience or chivalry. Actually, he was hunting in the jungle near Karnal when the battle was being fought at Panipat. Bairam did not approve of his running the risk of participating in what at one time looked an unequal fight. Akbar joined the army as soon as the news of victory was relayed to him. At the bidding of Bairam, he presented awards to the victorious generals, and also ordered the erection of many a mound made of the heads of the fallen Afghans. That he hesitated to strike Hemu with his sword is perhaps to give him credit for qualities of the heart he did not at that time possess. However, the debate is



only academic. It is immaterial as to who beheaded Hemu. The one man who could have stopped the Mughal advance to Delhi was liquidated. The end of the 104-year rule of Hindustan by the Afghan dynasty was now in sight. Without Hemu, Adil Shah was reduced to extreme military indigence, and he quickly gave up any aspiration that he might have harboured to capture the throne at Delhi. Sikandar Sur was still at large, but his presence in the field was of little consequence. The road to Delhi was now virtually clear for Bairam and his ward.

Without letting the grass grow under his feet, the Khan-i-Khanan, accompanied by a radiant Akbar, reached Delhi on 6 November. The capital gave them a big, spontaneous welcome. For Akbar it was a home-coming, not a new conquest. Troops were ordered not to indulge their penchant for plunder; in lieu, they were given monetary rewards from the treasuries that fell into the Mughal hands. However, as a warning against acts of disloyalty, Bairam Khan ordered the erection, just outside the city walls, of a mountain of heads that rolled at Panipat. The grisly sight was a reminder that another Timurid had come to power, and that it would be futile for anyone to challenge what was considered a just dispensation of the Almighty Allah.

In the last week of November came the news that Sikandar Sur was on the march towards Lahore. Bairam realized the danger, and made ready to meet the challenge. But, before leaving for Punjab he decided to cleanse the neighbourhood of Delhi of pro-Afghan elements. He deputed Nasir-ul-Mulk\* to subjugate Alwar where Haji Khan, one-time courtier of Sher Shah, ruled as a near-independent monarch. Also, in that principality resided the father and wife of Hemu with other family members. Vast treasures were known to be in their possession. Haji Khan took fright and fled before the arrival of the imperial army. The whole of Mewat and Alwar thus came into Akbar's possession. Then Nasir-ul-Mulk proceeded to Deoti Macari where Hemu's family resided. Some fighting took place before the aged father of Hemu was brought in chains before Nasir-ul-Mulk. The latter offered to set him free provided he embraced Islam and undertook to live quietly at a place of his own choice. The old man turned down the offer in

\*Nasir-ul-Mulk (victor of the country) was the title given to Pir Muhammad Khan.

these words: "For eighty years, I have worshipped my God according to the religion of my forefathers. Why should I change it at this time and why should I, merely from fear of my life, and without understanding it adopt your way of worship?" Nasir-ul-Mulk replied, in the words of Abul Fazl, "with the tongue of his sword." There is no record of the treatment meted out to other members of the family, but it may not be wrong to presume that they too were put to death in a similar manner. The heavily fortified village was plundered to its very bones and left drenched in the blood of hundreds of innocent men, women and children. Both Bairam and Akbar were pleased with the performance of Pir Muhammad, and decorated him profusely when he returned to Delhi.

On 7 December 1556, Akbar left Delhi for Punjab. Mahdi Qasim Khan, a veteran soldier, was left in charge of the capital. The expeditionary force pressed on with a sense of urgency. The news was disquieting inasmuch as several tribal chiefs were reported to have made common cause with Sikandar. On the way, the news came from Lahore that the wife\* of Bairam Khan had given birth to a son, and that he had been named Abdur Rahim. Akbar held a grand feast to celebrate the occasion, at which he presented his guardian tutor with a head-to-foot dress embroidered in gold. The camp astrologers pronounced the birth to be a lucky omen, and told Bairam that the child was destined to achieve greatness as a warrior statesman.

When the royal party reached Jullunder, information came that Sikandar had once again fled to the hills, and that he had taken refuge in the fortress of Mankot. This fort, built by Islam Shah Sur at the time when he had marched out to subjugate the Gakkar tribes, was a complex of four castles constructed at the crest of four hills, and was considered to be impregnable. Bairam Khan, however, moved quickly and laid siege, and asked the garrison to surrender. Sikander resisted stoutly, and the siege dragged on for six months before he offered to lay down arms. The keys of the fort were surrendered to Mughal officers on 24 May 1557. Akbar

\*This wife of Bairam Khan was of the family of the Khans of Mewat. When Humayun was in Delhi, a big landlord of Mewat, Khan Jamal, came to pay homage to him. He had two beautiful daughters. Humayun married the elder and gave the younger one to Bairam Khan.

received the Afghan ruler with courtesy and, as pre-arranged, gave him for life the fief of Bihar. He died peacefully two years later. This was the end of the Sur dynasty. Adil Shah had died earlier in a battle with the ruler of Bengal.

It was during the siege at Mankot that the wives and sisters of Humayun arrived in India from Kabul. Akbar went a stage out of Mankot to welcome his mother, Hamida Banu Begum, and other ladies. The group included, among others, Haji Begum, Gulbadan Begum, Gulchera Begum and Salima Sultan Begum. Two full sisters of Akbar died on the way—an occurrence that saddened the heart of Hamida Banu, and made the reunion with her son an affair charged with emotion. She met Akbar after a lapse of nearly three years, and was amazed at the change that had come about in his personality. He was now a King, the ruler of territories extending from the Ganges to Badakhshan. She was in a quandary, not knowing whether to greet him as a king or as a son. Akbar guessed her thoughts correctly, and set her at rest by throwing himself in her waiting arms with the excitement of a child long separated from his parent. Akbar showed the selfsame respect and love for his other “mothers” and aunts, and won the heart of everyone by the spontaneity of the welcome he extended to each. He forgot completely that he was a Padshah, and spent two days and nights with them narrating in the manner of an over-strung child his experiences from the time he left Kabul in 1554. Costly gifts, including traysful of precious stones of the purest hue, were given to each royal lady. Arrangements were quickly made for their journey onwards to Delhi. Shams-ud-Din Khan, husband of Jiji Anaga, was in overall command of the armed contingent assigned the task of escorting the ladies to the capital.

Akbar's long stay at Mankot was made memorable by his marriage—the first of many he contracted during his life-time—with the bright-eyed, nineteen-year-old daughter of Mirza Abdullah Khan Mughal. Bairam Khan opposed this marriage on the ground that Abdulla Mughal's sister had been married to Mirza Kamran, and that the alliance might reopen the wounds of intra-family jealousies. Akbar was, however, insistent, and prepared himself if need be, to flout the wishes of his tutor. Nasir-ul-Mulk saved the situation; he advised Bairam not to stand in the way of the young King as emotional frustration at that tender age might result in unpredictable consequences. Bairam saw the cogency of his

argument, and gave his approval for the marriage. The silent tiff with the Khan-i-Khanan marked the beginning of the latter's downfall.

Once the seed of distrust between Akbar and Bairam Khan was sown, the gulf between them widened quickly. Small incidents fed misunderstandings, and gradually led them apart. In the course of victory celebrations at Mankot, an elephant fight was staged between two best known animals—Fatah and Lagna. An exciting bout, lasting more than an hour, ended in Fatah beating a fast retreat and Lagna giving him a hot chase. The runaways trampled underfoot many a tent and war equipage. As luck would have it, one of the animals ran over the ground of Bairam Khan's enclosure. The Khan-i-Khanan was offended beyond words; he thought the fight and the consequent chase had been stage-managed to bring him to ridicule. He complained to Akbar, but the latter paid no heed as the incident, in his opinion, was not worthy of serious attention.

Abul Fazl narrates an incident which clearly tells of a conflict raging at this time within Akbar—a conflict that stemmed perhaps from the years of subseivence to Bairam Khan:

One day the Shahinshah felt constrained by the presence of short-sighted men, and began to chafe. He became averse to the servants of Fortune's threshold who always attended on his stirrup, and issued an order that no one of his retinue should be in attendance on him. He even sent away his grooms and such like persons so that the solitude of his retirement might not be contaminated by the crowd of this class of men, and went out untended and alone from the camp of fortune. In fact he was engaged in prayerful communion with his God, though ostensibly he was angered with men. Among his special horses there was a noble Iraqi horse called Hairan which Khizr Khwaja Khan had presented to him. It had not its like for spirit and swiftness, and was also unequalled for viciousness. When he was let loose no one could come near him, and it was with difficulty that he could be re-caught. The Divine hero of the world (Akbar), owing to his strength and courage, rode him constantly.

In this period of solitude he mounted upon this suspicious steed and set off rapidly, leaving society aside and increasing his glory by the presence of God. When he had gone some distance,

he dismounted for some purpose and, becoming heedless of the nature of his steed, assumed the posture of communing with his God. That swift and fiery horse acted according to his custom and rushed off rapidly so that it disappeared from the far-searching gaze of His Majesty. When his holy heart was again disposed to mount, there was no one in attendance, and no horse at his service. For a little while he was perplexed, not knowing what to do. Then suddenly he saw that this very horse was coming from a distance and galloping toward him. It ran on till it came back to him and stood quietly waiting for him. His Majesty was astonished, and again mounted the noble animal. God be praised! What apprehension can there be from solitude to him whom the incomparable deity favours, and of whom he takes charge?

This event convinced Akbar, more than ever before, that God was on his side, and that he did not need to submit unnecessarily to the will of others. He admired Bairam for his loyalty, but that was no cogent reason for him to continue obeying the Khan meekly in state affairs. The time had come, he thought, for him to take the reins of government in his own hands.

It was amidst such thoughts that he left Mankot for Lahore on 31 July 1557. In the capital of the Punjab many tribal chiefs, including Sultan Adam of Gakkar, came to pledge their loyalty to the young Emperor. He received all of them with his new-found confidence, and left no one in doubt that he was not a mere figure-head. Bairam perceived the change, but he wisely chose to follow the line of least resistance in the hope that the Timurid lust for pleasure would soon get the better of the king's interest in state affairs. Akbar too was not yet ready for an open rift with one who had been mainly responsible for military successes against the Afghans. He seemed to have resolved not to disturb the status quo till he was firmly settled on the throne at Agra. To allay suspicion of his intentions, he frequently bestowed honours and gifts on the Khan and his family.

After a stay in Lahore of four months and fourteen days, Akbar left for Agra on 7 December 1557. Reports from the capital were reassuring; Afghan dissidents around Delhi and Agra had been subdued; there was no sign yet of recrudescence of Rujput hostility against the Mughals; Hingu chieftains were for the time being lying low to reassess the situation following the fall of

Hemu and his master Adil Shah; the surrender of Sikandar Sur was generally regarded by the population as God's verdict in favour of the Mughals; Akbar's army was in good heart; no longer did the mercenaries clamour for return to their homes; they had been compensated adequately for their toils and sacrifices; military successes had bred confidence and unity among the top generals. The picture all around was of calm and hopefulness. To no small extent did the credit for these favourable trends rest with Bairam Khan. He stood like a rock—firm, faithful and full of purpose—at a time when the Mughal future was a question-mark. Few appreciated this more than Akbar; he was aware that without the steady influence of the Khan-i-Khanan, the road to Agra would not have been as smooth as it now seemed. Though the Khan's arrogance irked Akbar at times, he considered this annoyance a small price to pay for his help. The Khan was for the time being irreplaceable.

While the army was camped at Jullundur, Bairam sought and obtained the Emperor's permission to marry Salima Sultan Begum, daughter of Humayun's sister, Gulbarg Begum, and Nuruddin Muhammad. She was not only beautiful; her refinement and attainments in the fields of literature and fine arts were on everybody's lips. It was Humayun who betrothed her to the Khan when the latter came to Kabul from Qandhar to join his expedition for the reconquest of Hindustan, but stipulated that marriage would be solemnized only after the throne at Agra was recaptured. Abul Fazl hints that Akbar was not happy over the proposed marriage of "this cupola of chastity" to a non-Timurid, but he was not in a position to turn down the Khan's request. Arrangements for the marriage were completed within a week. The wedding day was marked by festivities lasting for three days and the presentation of costly gifts by Akbar both to Bairam and Salima Begum.

Abul Fazl extolls in his usual florid phraseology "the purity and nobility of disposition" of Salima—attributes which appealed to Akbar so much that he married her after the ouster of the Khan-i-Khanan from court in 1560.\*

In March 1558, Akbar left Jullundur for Agra. A bright future awaited him.

\*Salima Sultan Begum lived till 1612.

## Bairam Blown Out

Akbar, accompanied by Khan Baba\*, entered Delhi on 17 April—an unusually hot day with sand-laden winds from the desert of Rajputana enveloping the capital in a haze that affected somewhat the colour and pageantry associated normally with such occasions. However, the people gathered in thousands at the crossroads to give a traditional welcome to the victorious army. Akbar, now a handsome, big-boned boy of sixteen, rode majestically on a well-caparisoned chestnut charger at the right of his grim-faced, thick-ribbed tutor. He acknowledged with smiles the shouts of Allah-hu-Akbar as the units of the royal bodyguard in their colourful Chughtai dresses pranced past the cheering crowds. Many a faithful dignitary kissed the stirrup of the Emperor's horse as the cavalcade entered the gates of the palace. Welcoming notes of the shahnai provided a sombre backdrop to an event that turned out to be a landmark in Akbar's life. He was on the threshold of an era of great achievements in Mughal history.

The family reunion was celebrated a few days later with a round of festivities spread over nine days. Hamida Banu Begum and Maham Anaga personally supervised every aspect of the celebrations ranging from private nautch parties to public giving away of alms to the poor. Mass prayers were held in mosques on all nine days for what Abul Fazl calls "the perpetuation of the rule of

\*Bairam Khan was called by Akbar Khan Baba which means Khan, the father.

Light over the forces of Darkness." All those who had contributed to the defeat of the Afghan armies were rewarded richly for their services. Bairam Khan was loaded with *khiltas* and jagirs commensurate with the part played by him in defusing the danger that Sikandar Sur at one time posed. He was now at the acme of his power, stern and unchallengeable, custodian of all authority on behalf of the youthful Emperor. His word was law. The people, big and small, feared him. Self-seeking opportunists clustered around him in the hope of gaining favours disproportionate to their talents, and thus whetted his ego to a point where he became oblivious even of the respect due to Akbar. Servile flatterers made him believe that he was in fact bigger than the Emperor. The resulting nepotism led to such miscarriage of justice as, in turn, bred discontentment and opposition to the clique that ruled.

Bairam Khan, a Turkoman of Shia faith had accompanied the army of Najam Sahni sent by Shah Ismail of Persia to assist Babar regain the throne of Samarkand. The rout of that army by the Uzbek chief Obaidullah Khan put an end to Babar's dream of capturing the throne on which once sat his great-grandfather Amir Timur. Bairam escaped death narrowly on the battlefield and, through a quirk of fate, came to join the ranks of Babar's army. His courage and loyalty won the admiration of the Mughal ruler. He fought bravely by the side of his master in many battles on either side of the Hindukush. Both at Panipat and Kanwaha his valour came in for high praise from the generals in command.

On ascending the throne, Humayun chose Bairam Khan to be the head of his personal bodyguard. In the campaign against Bahadur Shah of Gujarat and Sher Shah Sur his courage and faithfulness led the Emperor to declare that "Bairam is the light of my eyes and the strength of my arms." At Champanir; he escaladed the fort immediately before Humayun and lent him a hand to take the last hazardous step to reach the rampart. At Chausa and Qanauj, he fought single-handed against heavy odds, and escaped capture by an enemy determined to annihilate the Mughal army. Following the flight of Humayun across the Rajputana desert to Amarkot, Bairam fell into the hands of Afghan soldiers, and was brought to Sher Shah for questioning. The latter, a shrewd judge of men, extended to him the courtesy which his gallantry warranted and offered to take the Khan into his service if he would renounce loyalty to Humayun. This the upright Bairam



could not bring himself to do, and he politely told the Afghan chief that if a person was disloyal once he could not be depended upon to be loyal again. Sher Shah was pleased with the reply, and spared his life. How the Khan escaped from Afghan custody is shrouded in mystery. From brief references in various books, it can, however, be gathered that he managed to win over his guards through the persuasive prowess of his tongue, crossed the desert of Sind at the risk of his life, and joined Humayun at Jun shortly before the Emperor's intended departure for Qandhar.

Bairam Khan's role in Humayun's dialogue with Shah Tahmasp of Persia was decisive. But for his diplomatic skill, it is doubtful whether Tahmasp would have given Humayun the massive military assistance which ultimately enabled him to conquer not only the western sector of the empire built by Babar but Hindustan as well. Bairam's loyalty was Humayun's biggest asset.

Akbar was aware of the crucial role the Khan had played in his father's bid to retake Hindustan. He respected Bairam for his integrity and devotion, but as he gained in years the natural urge to be the master of his own destiny asserted itself. A few indiscreet acts which Bairam happened to commit became convenient tools in the hands of his opponents to stoke the fire of self-assertion in the young Emperor's heart.

The murder of the loyal Tardi Beg in 1556 was perhaps the first of Bairam's injudicious acts that irked Akbar. Though only fourteen, he was mature enough to be alive to the iniquity of the act. Considering discretion to be the best part of valour, the Beg, who was then Governor of Delhi, abandoned the city without a fight when Hemu advanced towards it from the east at the head of a massive force, and fled to join the imperial army at Sirhind. Bairam Khan realized that it was impossible for the Beg to hold the city with the small force at his disposal, but he chose to use the event as a pretext to remove from his path a dignitary whose status and record of service were second to none. He feared that the Beg could at any time jettison his authority. Bairam invited Tardi Beg to his tent, received him with a show of courtesy, and then left suddenly on the apologia of an urgent engagement. A group of hired assassins then trooped in, and hacked the Beg to pieces. Akbar was out hawking at the time, but when he came to know of the gruesome killing, his expression of shock was virtually a shriek that surprised Bairam. However, Akbar was helpless. His

dependence on Bairam was total. A seemingly invulnerable army of eight thousand Afghan and Hindu soldiers under Hemu was advancing rapidly to check the Mughal advance. Bairam, and he alone, could save a situation which was almost hopeless. Akbar gave a silent approval to Bairam's decision to liquidate Tardi Beg, but he in fact never forgave his *atalique* for the callous deed.

The treatment meted out to Tardi Beg shocked many loyalists, including Munim Khan who was at that time on his way to Delhi from Kabul. The Khan retraced his steps from near Jalalabad, and did not leave his post\* till after the ouster of Bairam in 1560.

As has been stated earlier, Bairam Khan was a shi'ite Muslim. His partiality towards officials belonging to that sect was a constant irritant to the Sunni majority. Also, the persons chosen to supervise the education of the Emperor were high-minded liberals to whom all religions were equal. The orthodox Sunnis were violently opposed to these appointments. Abdul Latif, a refugee from Persia, was raised to the status of the Emperor's preceptor number one. According to Abdul Qadir Badaouni, though Abdul Latif was a "paragon of greatness," his catholicity was a source of annoyance to those who wanted the Emperor to be brought up as a devout believer in the tenets of Sunnism. The renowned artists Mir Sayed Ali and Khwaja Abdul Samad, deputed to give Akbar lessons in painting and calligraphy, were also free men not bound irrevocably to any narrow religious dogma. It was suspected that Bairam hand-picked these men to wean the Emperor away from the traditional Timurid ways of worship, and to inculcate in him respect for all faiths and religions.

Though from the very beginning Akbar was averse to formal academic studies, and did not learn to the end of his days how to read and write, it may not be wrong to presume that his mind responded positively to the teachings of a cluster of renowned free-thinkers around him. A prodigious memory more than made up for the lack of traditional book knowledge in his composition. He liked to listen and recapitulate, and it was not seldom that he surprised his tutors by quoting verbatim from classical works

\*Munim Khan was appointed 'de facto' Governor of Kabul when Humayun started on his campaign to recapture Hindustan. Officially, the principality was entrusted to the charge of his infant son Muhammad Hakim.

highly abstract argument in support of or against a proposition.

Akbar preferred to spend his time out of doors, hunting, hawking or just observing the miracles that nature has wrought on the face of the earth. Animals fascinated him, especially the camel and the elephant. Abul Fazl has recorded the names of many a famous elephant whom he daily fed personally on costly preparations to improve their strength and stamina. Often he drove *mast* elephants plied liberally with strong alcoholic drinks. Experienced mahouts feared to take such liberties as the youthful Emperor used to take with these drunken beasts; he would climb to their necks via the trunk, race them through jungles infested with lions and tigers, prod them to swim through swollen rivers, and engage them in fights which, according to Abul Fazl, bore the appearance of Olympian death-grapples. There was no fear in Akbar's heart. Once when the mahout of an elephant on the verge of defeat at the hands of a beast he himself was driving was thrown to the ground, Akbar did the daring act of jumping on to the neck of the riderless animal, and succeeded in rescuing it from a hopeless position. Both the elephants fled the arena, doing considerable damage to life and property. Akbar escaped unhurt, much to the relief of a wide-eyed, breathless crowd of spectators.

It was in the course of a stampede following an inconclusive fight between Akbar's Faujdar and Bairam Khan's Zorawar that a supervisor of the Khan's household was trampled underfoot by the former. The Khan-i-Khanan was so enraged at this incident that he sentenced to death the driver of Akbar's elephant. The verdict shocked the Emperor. Four days he grieved at the injustice done to his favourite mahout, and openly defied the Khan in granting liberal financial assistance to the distressed family.

On another occasion, the Khan ordered a mahout of Akbar to be publicly given fifteen lashes of the whip. This was perhaps the last of many acts of indiscretion committed by the Khan that led Akbar to make up his mind to take the reins of Government in his own hands.

Meanwhile, a scandal regarding the unnatural love of Khan-i-Zaman Ali Quli\* for Shaham, the handsome son of a camel driver,

\*Ali Quli, *ashī'ite* Muslim, was appointed Governor of Qandhar by Bairam Khan following his decision to join Humayun's expeditionary force for the recapture of Hindustan. In the terms of the treaty with Shah Tahmasp,

did the rounds of court circles. Akbar could not contain his revulsion when he came to know of the affair. What distressed him more was that Bairam Khan took no step to remind the Khan-i-Zaman of the impropriety of his infatuation. On the contrary, he defied the general opinion of the *amirs* that Shaham should be stripped of such honours as Ali Quli had heaped on him. Bairam's partiality was galling not only to the Emperor but to a large majority of Mughal and Indian nobility as well. The two most powerful ladies—Hamida Banu Begum and Maham Anaga—were particularly shocked at what Abul Fazl calls “the perversity of the sordid affair” and began to think in terms of a coup to oust from power Bairam and his train-bearers. Adham Khan, the temperamental son of Maham Anaga and Shahab-ud-Din Khan, Governor of Delhi, were the first to be drawn into the plot. They realized that utmost secrecy was essential if success was to be achieved. Surrounded as he was by sneaking sycophants, Bairam at that time had no inkling of the conspiracy that was hatching against him.

The Shaham affair was complicated by Ali Quli Khan's infatuation with a prostitute by the name of Aram Jan. Against the advice of his friends, he married her, and set himself on a disgusting course of satisfying his lusts in the presence of Shaham. In fact, he and Shaham used to have sexual orgies with Aram Jan as partner following lavish drinking and dance parties. The stage was thus set for a love-hate drama doomed for a tragic ending: Shaham fell in love with Aram Jan, seduced her away from Ali Quli, and then after a while passed her on to Abdül Rahman Beg, a high spirited Turkman to whom sensual pleasure was the only desired object of life. Shaham's lust rekindled, and he one night forcibly took away Aram Jan from the residence of Abdül Rahman. The latter's brother Muiyed Beg was enraged at this act of abduction, gave a hot chase to the couple, and murdered Shahamata pleasure-house he had repaired to with Arm Jan. The heroine of this drama ultimately came back to Ali Quli via Abdül Rahman.

The elimination of Shaham Beg aroused no sympathy; he was a

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Qandhar was ceded to Persia by Akbar in 1559. Ali Quli, thereafter, came to Delhi, and was the recipient of high honours at the hands of Bairam Khan.

hated catamite whose "loves" had brought disgrace to the Mughal court. Akbar, when told of his death, exclaimed: "The world is cleaner by the passing away of this wretched man." Bairam Khan, however, made no comment. He had a weak spot in his heart for Ali Quli Khan—a weakness that was fully exploited by the increasing number of his opponents.

The appointments of Shaikh Gadai, son of a comparatively unknown Mulla of the Shia sect, to the high post of Sadr-i-Sadr served only to consolidate opposition to the Protector. Badaouni, an ultra-orthodox Sunni, is unsparing in his choice of vitriolic words to decry the Sheikh for his partiality and lack of administrative talent:

The Shaikh was a mere tool in the hands of the Khan-i-Khanan for disbursement of favours to members of the Shia sect. He lacks decorum in both speech and action. Fanaticism of the most iniquitous variety was reflected unmistakably in his decisions to apportion jagirs to worthless men wallowing in the sin of heresy. Large sums of money were disbursed daily in obedience to the whims of his benefactor. The evil in his heart was writ large and clear on the ungainly contours of his exterior self. The shape of his mind was also disfigured badly by the narrowness of his ideas. The Khan-i-Khanan turned a blind eye to the thousand and one blemishes in his makeup. Neither did he take account of the hundreds of complaints against the injustices committed by the Sheikh. He wanted a yes-man at the helm of affairs in the department of Sadr, and in Gadai he found a servile self-seeker who was always ready to sign on the dotted line. The ultimate downfall of the Khan was in no small measure due to his bias in favour of one who commanded respect neither for his piety nor his powers of intelligence. Men like Gadai are the curses of God on the earth. To their jaundiced eyes all evil looks honourable, and they equate sin with virtue. Many dynasties have come to grief because of the prejudices of such crazy buffoons. The Khan of the Khans paid dearly for his failure to assess Gadai correctly. He drew the wrath of God for putting his trust in non-believers. The law of retribution truly works with the inevitability of night following the day.

Badouni's criticism of Sheikh Gadai is perhaps a reflection of his

own fanaticism. However, the fact remains that Bairam's choice was ill-advised, and that aroused the suspicions and hostility of the orthodox Sunnis.

Ever since his tiff with Akbar at Mankot over the young Emperor's choice of a bride for himself, Bairam secretly harboured the thought of placing on the throne the less self-willed Abdul Qasim, son of Mirza Kamran. His partiality towards the 12-year-old prince was noticed by many watchers of events at the court, in particular by the astute and ever suspicious Maham Anaga whose womanly intuition warned her of the designs of the Protector. High-calibre tutors were appointed to supervise the education of Qasim. Besides he was a frequent visitor to the Khan's palace where courtesies due to a monarch were extended to him. Adham Khan happened to be present once when the prince came to visit the Khan-i-Khanan. He was intrigued at the ceremonial with which Qasim was received by Bairam himself, and was quick to carry to his mother a full report of the alleged impropriety of the proceedings. Perhaps his narration was an exaggeration, but it could not be denied that the *taslims* with which Qasim received were uncalled for. Maham shared her fears with Hamida Banu, and the two became still more united in their resolve to topple the towering Turkoman.

In 1560, Bairam was aware of the winds of change that were blowing around him. His best chance to stay in authority, he reckoned, was perhaps to win over to his side the sympathies of the influential segment of the Afghans. To that end, Bairam wooed a son of Sikandar Sur who, he thought, might come handy in the event of a showdown with Akbar and his Mughal mercenaries. Shahab-ud-Din Khan, Governor of Delhi, came to know about Bairam's secret dialogue with some Afghan chiefs in the east, and he apprised the palace dissidents of the conspiracy that he feared was hatching. By this time, both Maham and Hamida Banu were in a mood to believe everything that was said against the Khan. The die was cast. The plotters were convinced that the threat to Akbar was real, and that there was no option but to join their heads to decide on the best means to get rid of the Khan. Bairam, they felt, was too strong to be downed with a frontal grapple. A wait-and-watch plan was agreed upon. Utmost circumspection was called for if success was to be achieved. A faulty move, it was realized, could be disastrous. An empire was at stake. They waited

patiently for an opportunity to catch the Khan on the wrong foot.

In one of his famous couplets, Shaikh Saadi says that "when the bird of misfortune starts hovering over the head of a dignitary, first intelligence then friends desert him one by one." The days of Bairam's glory were now coming to an end. For too long he had basked in fame and prosperity. The signs were clear that his intelligence was warped, and that no more was he the master of the suave diplomacy which endeared him both to Babar and Humayun. Instead, his increasing haughtiness caused concern among the courtiers, and a large number of them, piqued by the insults and indignities suffered at his hands, prepared for a confrontation. Among them was Nasir-ul-Mulk Pir Muhammad Khan whose military successes had secured for him a place of high honour in the official hierarchy.

One day, Pir Muhammad was suddenly taken ill. After the mid-day prayers, Bairam Khan wanted to inquire about his health. As the royal *hakim* attending on Nasir-ul-Mulk had given instructions that nobody should be ushered into see the Khan without his permission, the Turk doorman stopped the Protector and went into seek orders. A few minutes later, the Pir himself came out to receive the distinguished visitor. But the latter had left in a huff at what he considered a show of discourtesy to him. The following letter was received by Pir Muhammad from Bairam Khan the next day:

You were wearing the dress of a poor soldier when you came to Qandhar. As you appeared simple and honest and did good service you were raised to high office by me, and from being a mere Mulla you became a leader of armies. As your capacity was small, you easily became intoxicated and got out of hand after one cup. We feel that lest some great mischief be committed by you, which it will be difficult to remedy, it is better that for some time you should draw in your feet under the blanket of disappointment and sit down in a corner. You will now make over your standard, drum and other insignia of authority, and betake yourself to the amending of your disposition, for this will be good both for yourself and the world. Thereafter whatever we shall decide about your future will be carried out.

Without a wrinkle on his brow, Pir Muhammad handed over the seal and insignia of his office to the bearer of the letter. He did not betray anguish at the prospect of forced retirement. Bairam expected Pir Muhammad to come to him crawling on his knees and seek forgiveness. He was disappointed to know of the equanimity with which the Pir had taken his fall from grace. Fearing that the veteran commander had some evil designs up his sleeve, Bairam ordered his arrest and had him sent under heavy guard to the fortress at Biana. With the help of some friends, the Pir managed to escape, and proceeded towards Gujarat with the intention of repairing to his native Hijaz.

In the meantime, letters came to Pir Muhammad from Adham Khan and Shahab-ud-Din Khan, asking him "to stay where you are." The final round of the battle against Khan-i-Khanan had begun. The dissidents could wait no longer. The appointment of Haji Muhammad Khan Siestani as wazir in place of the Pir caused considerable heart-swelling all around. The choice was unfortunate in that the Haji had offended not long ago Maham Anaga and Hamida Banu Begum over a trivial matter. Adham Khan took the appointment as a studied affront to the palace, and reckoned the time was opportune for the kill. Never before had Bairam had so many opponents around him. Even some of his closest friends had shown dissatisfaction with the manner in which the affairs of the state were being conducted. The Bairam caucus had gradually dwindled to a handful of heartless autocrats who, individually or collectively, were not in a position to muster popular support. The zero hour came when Bairam decided to send an expeditionary force to subdue the fleeing Pir Muhammad. Alarmed, the latter fled, and took refuge with a Hindu chieftain. All his property and assets were confiscated. His wives and children were confined in the fort at Biana. Vengeance for an imaginary insult could not have gone further.

The hour of nemesis was now near. For the next six months, the events moved with such rapidity as to leave the historians guessing for their sequence. The dramatis personae were themselves bewildered at the pace of developments, and were not unoften caught on the wrong foot. Though Akbar was the undeclared hero of the drama, the conspirators took care not to expose him to the dangers of that role. Under the pretext of a visit to his ailing mother, Akbar left Agra for Delhi on 19 March 1560. Maham



Anaga, ever suspicious of Bairam's intentions, took the precaution of sending Qasim Beg, Kamran's son, with the Emperor. The royal travellers took eight days to complete the 100-mile journey. On the way, Akbar indulged his penchant for hunting, and he and members of his family spent many a pleasant hour each day after sunset listening to Hindustani music by the side of a stream or a spring. Care was taken to give the trip an appearance of casualness—a safeguard considered necessary to keep Bairam off the scent.

On reaching the safety of Delhi on 27 March, the mask was thrown away, and a directive was issued under the royal seal that henceforth all administrative matters should be referred for decision to the Emperor himself. This was in fact a proclamation that the Emperor had assumed all powers, and that the Khan-i-Khanan was no longer the custodian of authority, a position he had enjoyed for nearly five years. The first shot had been fired, and its implications were not lost either in Delhi or Agra. The Protector received an urgent message from Muhammad Baqi, father-in-law of Adham Khan, that the young monarch was in a belligerent mood and that, assisted by the Governor, Shahab-ud-Din, he had succeeded in gaining complete control of the capital. Bairam Khan sat up in surprise, called a meeting of the counsellors, and discussed with them for many days the possible results of the takeover. Some advised immediate submission, others threw their weight on the side of confrontation, and a small minority expressed their preference for a wait-and-see tactic. For once Bairam did not know what to do; the faithful in him was in conflict with considerations of self-preservation, and his dilemma thickened as the news came from Delhi that Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan Ataka, husband of Jiji Anaga, had been summoned from his post in Bhera to take over the Governorship of the strategically important province of Punjab. This was not all. The veteran loyalist, Munim Khan, Governor of Kabul, had also been asked to present himself at the court without delay. A word had also gone to Pir Muhammad Khan, who was hiding somewhere in Gujarat, that he should come out to join the Emperor at Delhi. Bahadur Khan, mulcted at the hands of Shujat Khan\* of Malwa, was

\*Shujat Khan was father of the famous Baz Bahadur who later came into conflict with Akbar's forces.

already on his way to Delhi to throw in his weight on the side of anti-Bairam elements. The situation was anything but hopeful for the Khan. He wavered for many days between open defiance and abject submission. In the end, on the advice of the hawks in his camp, he decided in favour of "war if one was thrust upon him."

For a while, Bairam toyed with the idea of making a common cause with the Afghans and coming out openly in support of claim to the throne by a son of Sikandar Sur. He also considered the advisability of a blitz against Punjab, and making that province a base for operations against the Emperor's armies. But in moments of depression, he looked towards Mecca and expressed not infrequently a wish to spend the remaining years of his life in the holy city. His quandary was real. He hung perilously between hope and hopelessness, and waited for a formal communication from Delhi. One came on 5 April. It read:

I regret having to address a communication like this to one who has served the Mughal dynasty loyally and with distinction for over forty years. The circumstances, however, leave me no choice. Reports have reached me of your decision to wage a war against our force. The reliability of these reports has been checked by me personally with great care. I have reached the conclusion that you have been misled by a set of self-seeking, treacherous traitors. Your plans to repair to Lahore and make Punjab the base for your adventure against our armies are particularly disturbing. We fear your activities may set the whole empire ablaze, and lead to results harmful to the Timurid dynasty. You have given the son of Sikandar Sur leave to depart so that he may foment disturbances throughout the country. You have sent a letter to the Governor of Punjab by the hand of his Diwan Mubarak, asking him to hold on to the city till your arrival there. You have also sent a message to Tatar Khan Pir. You are known to have sent instructions in all directions for creation of disturbances. Your plans to subjugate Alwar before pressing on to Lahore are also known to us. You have already ordered that Shah Abul Ma'ali be freed from the fort at Biana. He has a great capacity for creating disaffection among our loyal subjects. Notwithstanding these and other similar reports, we are inclined to take a lenient view of the unfortunate deve-

lopments. We can never forget the services you have rendered to the Timurid family. Your record of loyalty cannot be matched by anyone. We tend to blame the small junta of *amirs* around you for these plottings. You have apparently been led astray from the path of devotion by these short-sighted sycophants. You yourself once said that it was impossible that after forty years' loyal and devoted service and after receiving high honours and favours of this glorious family, one should turn into a rebel and not be ashamed of one's God.

As you are still dear to us, we would like to bestow upon you a suitable province where you could lead undisturbed a life of honour, but we are afraid the coterie of conceited courtiers around you will not leave you in peace even there. They will continue to exploit your status and dignity for their narrow ends for as long as you are within their reach. We would, therefore, suggest that you make preparations to go to the holy city of Mecca. You will recall having expressed a wish several times to be able to repair to that sacred city and seek self-realization through meditation and prayers. Adequate financial arrangements will be made for your maintenance there. Your jagirs and properties in Hindustan will be managed by your own agents. They will be free to remit the proceeds to you regularly by the hand of special messengers. Also, we assure you that such members of your family as choose to stay back in Hindustan will be treated with the respect and honour your status warrants. You may return to Hindustan, if you so wish, after the present storm has blown over and the situation becomes normal.

If you accept our suggestion, we shall be pleased to receive you at the court with honours greater than you have received so far. We hope and trust you will avail of our generous offer, and undertake the pilgrimage notwithstanding the dissuasions of your counsellors. We wish you well, and beseech the Almighty that He may in His benificence guide you to take the right decision.

This *firman*—which amounted to an order of exile—confirmed Bairam's worst fears. The tone of the communication was firm and irreconciliatory. The Khan felt Akbar was determined to defuse his authority and take the administration in his own hands. It

was clear to him the takeover plan was masterminded by Maham Anaga. She had combined, Bairam felt, the loquacity of an angry woman with feminine militancy to convince Akbar that he contemplated open rebellion, and that the sooner he was removed from the scene the better it would be for the future of the empire. Realizing the futility of entering into an argument in self-defence, the Protector slid out of Agra on 8 April to escape the net which, he sensed, was closing in on him.

His plan was to try to reach Punjab while the going was good, that is before Akbar consolidated his position militarily. For the success of his strategy, he depended largely on the support of a fairly large number of Trojan Horses in Akbar's camp. The number of Mughal and Hindustani noblemen who sat on the fence, awaiting the outcome of the tussle, was considerable. He reckoned that desertions would cripple Delhi once it was known that he was not prepared to give in without a fight. To keep the imperialists guessing about his movements, he chose a circuitous route for the 400-mile march to Lahore. At Alwar, he sought and secured the promise of support from the local chieftain. Then he pressed on to Biana, released Shah Abul Ma'ali from the fort there, enlisting him as a partner in the counter-plot to overthrow Akbar. He lodged his family members—including the young Salima Sultan Begum—in the strong fortress at Sirhind, and then turned southwards to arouse the Hindu rulers of Bikaner to rebellion against Delhi. The military situation at this stage was very fluid. Historians differ in their interpretations as to what followed next. In fact, it seems Bairam was being carried away involuntarily on the wave of an undefined resolution, and that he did not even know with precision the move he was to make next. Desertions from the imperial army did not come about as expected. On the contrary, reports came of a massive move by Akbar to block his way to Lahore. Bairam, reputed to be the master of speed and surprise, was for once slow on his feet. His vacillation perhaps came from a conflict that raged furiously within him—a conflict between the values he held dear in the past and those that the present circumstances forced him to own. His passivity puzzled his supporters. In slow marches, he jogged along to the bank of the river Beas, and remained encamped there for a number of days, and waited for something to happen, somehow, to bolster his flagging spirits.

Bairam's stars at this time were, however, not moving in astro-

logically propitious orbits. It seemed the days of his ascendancy were over. The force at his command, though sizable in numbers, reflected his own doubts and misgivings. Time was against him. Then came the news, like a bolt from the blue, that a large army under the joint command of Shams-ud-Din Mohammad, Pir Muhammad Khan and Bahadur Khan was advancing fast to block his march to Punjab. Akbar himself stayed behind at Sirhind at the head of an elite contingent of reservists. However, he had a message sent to Khan Baba in which he once again stressed the futility of hostilities, and urged him to surrender unconditionally. Excerpts from this communication are given below:

Your services and your fidelity to this great family are known to mankind. It is a matter of great surprise and shock to us that you have chosen the path of warfare, and are intent upon damaging the grand empire you have helped build up. Both history and God will not forgive you for the crime you are about to commit. Because of the respect in which we hold you, the offer made to you earlier is still open. The commanders of our army are under instructions not to fire the first shot, but if you finally decide to use force they will have no option but to resist with every resource at their disposal.

For many years, because of our tender age, we did not cast our glance on political and financial affairs, and all the business of sovereignty was entrusted to your excellent capacity and knowledge. Now that we have applied our own mind to the affairs of Government, it seems to us only right that you should respect our wishes and lend us your valuable support. To build an empire at once strong and prosperous is our common objective. We respect your wisdom and have faith in your loyalty. In our childhood, we called you Khan Baba. Our attachment and deference for you remain unchanged. We have no intention to humiliate or dishonour you. Your surrender will be a victory for the values you yourself hold dear. In this greatest of all your conquests, you will be honoured both by God and your king.

Let me tell you, O revered friend of the family, that in the remote chance of our army suffering a setback at your hands, the Almighty Allah will record the blackest ever defeat in the ledger of your scores. It is not for us to give you lessons in moral behaviour. You are the preceptor, the wise one of the age.

In reminding you of your obligations, we are only repeating what you yourself taught us times without number.

We look forward to receiving you at the court with the honours due to your status.

This was a letter drafted perhaps by a panel of Akbar's counsellors. It seems the Emperor was genuinely at pains to avoid an armed conflict with his former tutor. It is likely that Maham Anaga and her son Adham Khan objected to the conciliatory tone of this communication, but they were apparently in a minority. Akbar fully realized the hazards of war with a general of Bairam Khan's experience. The risks involved were too great to be ignored. Also, it needs to be stressed that the humanist in Akbar was a reality that showed up invariably in a crisis. His respect for the Khan was genuine. He wanted to save his one-time tutor the ignominy of a defeat on the battlefield. It was to this end that this letter was addressed. He also wanted to leave nothing undone to save himself the agony of having to go to war against one who for three generations stood steadfastly by the side of the Mughal family to protect and advance its interest.

According to Badaouni, Bairam Khan was touched at the "open-hearted sincerity" of Akbar's appeal, and was on the verge of announcing an unconditional surrender when a group of officers dissuaded him from that course. He was led to believe that the letter was a trap laid to arrest and humiliate him. The real author of the letter, they held, was Maham Anaga who could not be expected to spare any subterfuge to destroy the Khan once and for all. Their scepticism struck a receptive chord within Bairam, and he came to the conclusion that to retrace steps at that stage was to court disaster. He felt that the go-to-Mecca clause in the Emperor's offer could not be the basis for an honourable settlement. Further, the appointment of Bahadur Khan as Vakil (at the instance of Maham Anaga) was, according to his advisers, a hostile move that could in no way inspire confidence. In actuality, Maham was in complete control of Government, and the Khan had no illusions about the intensity of her hatred for him. So he decided that there was no turning back. An attempt to capture Punjab was to be made whatever the cost. With luck, Bairam felt, the imperial blockade could be broken through. As a reply to Akbar's letter, Bairam handed over his insignia of office to the messenger, the

implication being that he was no more a servant of the Emperor. The split was complete. The ball was now in Akbar's court. Bairam declared he had no option but to fight.

The advance guard of the imperial army intercepted Bairam near Philaur, about forty miles from Jullundur. In the initial skirmishes, Shams-ud-Din Khan suffered unexpected reverses, due largely to the treachery of some junior officers. Bairam was heartened by these successes, and declared that Punjab was a plum ready to fall into his lap. The spirited Pir Muhammad Khan, however, rallied his forces and struck at the enemy with all his might at the village of Gunacur, demolished the formations of a gutless army, and went in hot pursuit to capture Bairam. The latter, however, eluded him, and took refuge with a Hindu chieftain in the Shivalik hills.

The battle of Gunacur took place on 16 August on a terrain soaking wet as a result of heavy monsoon rains. The imperialists scored a decisive victory. The rebels were driven back with heavy losses. Bairam escaped capture. He fled to the hills with a band of his followers. The sultry weather and the soggy surface compelled Pir Muhammad to retrace his steps, but he posted contingents of trusted men at all strategic passes to ensure that Bairam did not stage a comeback. News of the victory was sent to Akbar at Sirhind. His reaction was one of pleasure tinged with sadness. Bairam's defeat was in fact a collapse of the values Akbar admired greatly. He was sorry at the thought that Fate did not show the right path to his Khan Baba in time. He wondered if it was now too late for the proud Khan to make amends for his unfortunate decision. Whether or not to close the door against him was a question that agitated Akbar for many days. Akbar's decision to write to him yet another letter showed the innate goodness of his heart:

We are grieved at the distress you have brought on yourself. The gates of our munificence will never be shut against you. It is never too late to repent and express regret. We repeat that you will be received with honour in case you still decide to surrender unconditionally. This is a pledge, a promise in recognition of your services to us, our father and our grandfather. We shall await your reply before ordering further action to put down once and for all the insurrection you have started.

Bairam was still suspicious of the motives of his former protege. However, he offered to surrender if Munim Khan, who had in the meantime been appointed Prime Minister, was sent to escort him to the court. Akbar did not hesitate to agree to this request. When brought to the presence of Akbar, Bairam cried aloud and sought forgiveness. Abul Fazl writes:

The day was unpropitious to sedition-mongers, and their faces were blackened. He (Bairam) turned his face towards the sublime court, and in the Divine month of Muharram (968) he flung a handkerchief round his neck and made the prostration of shame and contrition. He laid his dust-strewn head at the feet of His Majesty, partly with pain, partly with shame for his crimes, and partly with joy at his pardon, and wept aloud. The Shahinshah accepted the excuse that he offered for his unfortunate behaviour, and with his sacred hand raised Bairam Khan's head from the ground of humiliation, and embraced him. He took the cloth from his neck, and wiped from his face the tears of penitence and the dust of shame. With his gracious lips, he inquired about his health and bade him sit on his right, as had been the rule when Bairam Khan was the Prime Minister. He bade Munim Khan sit beside him, while other officers took their places according to their rank. With his pearl-dropping lips the Shahinshah uttered such words of kindness and favour that the dust of bashfulness and the mist of shame disappeared from the Khan's brow. Thereafter, His Majesty rose up and bestowed on Bairam Khan a glorious robe which he was wearing over his own breast, and gave him permission to go to Hijaz. Two high officers of the court were deputed to escort the Khan to the border of the Empire.

Accepting his fate with equanimity, Bairam marched across Rajputana towards the coast in order to board a ship to Mecca. In a few weeks he arrived at Patan, the ancient capital of Gujarat. The Afghan Governor of the city, Musa Khan Fauladi, received the Khan with honour and made suitable arrangements for his stay there pending the arrival of a ship. The famous gardens and lakes of the town charmed Bairam, and he made it a point to visit the nearby beauty spots nearly every day. One evening he had just landed from a visit to an island pavilion in the principal



lake when he was waylaid by a party of armed Afghans, led by one Mubarak Khan, whose father had lost his life at the hands of Bairam in the battle of Machiwara. The Khan was stabbed to death, and his body was left on the ground, and it was picked up the next morning by some local fakirs. They gave it a poor man's burial, not knowing that the body was that of the great Khan-i-Khanan who virtually ruled over Hindustan for nearly a decade.\*

Abul Fazl refers briefly to the involvement of a woman in the murder. She was "a beauteous flower from the valley of Kashmir." Bairam wanted to take her with him to Hijaz. Her husband, a woolmerchant of sizable wealth and influence, was indignant, and hired a gang of unruly Pathans to have the Khan removed from his path. The woman (her name is not given) was disconsolate when she came to know of the foul deed, and she beseeched God amidst sobs and sighs that she be given the courage and faith to put up with her grief with equanimity. The Governor, according to a story current in Gujarat, ordered her face to be disfigured, and silenced her wailings by cutting the tip of her tongue.

Many historians have hinted that the murder of Bairam Khan was arranged by the Governor of Patan at the instance of Adham Khan. This is a plausible surmise. Both Maham Anaga and Adham Khan were opposed to the soft line the Emperor took in condoning the rebellion. Their hatred of the Khan was in proportion to their fear of his staging a comeback with the help of Muslim and Hindu dissidents. The empire was yet far from being stable. Bairam outside, they reckoned, was more dangerous than Bairam inside the court. His liquidation was, therefore, in all probability an act of violence planned and sanctioned in Delhi. The Governor of Patan not only did not take steps to ensure the Khan's safety; he readily agreed to let him go unescorted to lonely, out-of-the-way pleasure spots.

The circumstantial evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of this conjecture.

Also, Akbar's admiration for Salima Sultan Begum had developed into an emotional compulsion necessitating Bairam's removal from his path. So the eighteen-year old Emperor, though outwardly distressed, was happy when the news of the Khan's murder reached

\*The date of Bairam Khan's murder is given by Abul Fazl as 31 January 1561.

him. He was now free to marry his talented cousin, and he did that shortly after the mourning period was over. Bairam's four-year-old son, Abdur Rahim, by a daughter of Jamal Khan of Mewat, was called to the court and given the benefit of receiving education from *ulema* of the highest intellectual attainments. In due course, he became one of the most illustrious courtiers of Akbar's reign, and ultimately donned his father's robes of Khan-i-Khanan. Other members of Bairam's family were given extensive jagirs, and all of them continued to enjoy royal favours for as long as they lived.

Akbar was not an ingrate. He never forgot that but for the military skill of Bairam Khan he could hardly have overcome the massive resistance put up by Hemu at Panipat four years earlier. He invariably gave the Khan the credit of being the saviour of the Mughal dynasty. Even Abul Fazl, who at times strongly criticises Bairam for his alleged "arrogance, conceit and partiality for members of the Shia faith," acknowledges in the end that he was "a sound administrator whom God had given in ample measure the gifts of wisdom, loyalty, devotion and steadfastness."

Fate—or call it what one may—at times seems to take delight in being capricious and unpredictable. Bairam was a man of positive qualities—brave, fearless, loyal and one endowed with a fierce purposiveness. In his life he took important decisions in full awareness of their consequences and in full faith of his capacities to live up to them. It is an irony that a man like him should fall in an ambush without a chance to defend himself. Here was an anticlimax that perhaps gave the ever-flippant Fate a chance to have a good laugh at its capacity to spring surprises. Bairam's achievements warranted the death of a hero, one respected by the high and low of the Empire; instead, his body, drenched in blood, lay on the dusty ground for a whole night before it was consigned to a hastily dug, wayside grave. It took years and many historians to bring out the pathos of the manner of his death. Many days after the foul deed had been committed, the Governor ordered the body to be taken out from its dusty dwelling, and had it interned in the precincts of the tomb of Shaikh Hassan, a religious teacher respected in Hindustan and abroad for his learning and piety. Afterwards, at the bidding of Akbar, the body was taken to Meshed and buried there finally with honours compatible to the status Bairam once enjoyed.

The manner of Bairam's death spoke not only of the cruelty

of Fate, but also of the oppressions of medieval monocracy. Once a pillar of the empire, Bairam crashed to the ground because of the antagonism of what came to be known as the tribe of the Emperor's foster-family. The worldly wise Maham Anaga wanted the whole range of honours and power reserved exclusively for her son Adham Khan and other relatives, and this she realized was not possible for as long as Bairam stood in the way. The plot to oust the Regent originated in the head of this ambitious woman enjoying the young monarch's trust. She prevailed upon many others—including the queen-mother Hamida Banu Begum—to give her their support. A large number of influential personalities decided, out of sheer self-interest, to throw in their lot with her. Step by step, she led the Emperor to a point of no return, and dealt the final blow only when she knew that a comeback by Bairam was out of the question. Her victory was the triumph of an ambitious woman's duplicity over the candour and pride of a gallant soldier.

The name of Bairam Khan shines bright and clear in the pages of the Mughal history. He will live in honour for as long as the world continues to look upon the virtue of loyalty as an insignia of high merit. In comparison, the foster-family conspirators were a set of self-seekers to whom loyalty was no more than a means of personal advancement. They will be remembered not for any of their individual achievement, but only in the context of elimination of Bairam Khan.

But for the dash and courage and sagacity of Akbar, the ouster of Bairam might have had disastrous results. He filled the breach admirably, and succeeded in bringing about political, administrative and military consolidation—a task which would have been the despair of a lesser man. Bairam's greatness was reflected in many ways in the makeup of the Emperor. Both were high-powered individuals resolved to act and achieve, and not fritter away their opportunities in pursuits repugnant to positive accomplishments. Both were sustained by the compelling consciousness of a mission, a conviction that they had not come unscathed from perilous situations because of the whims of a fortuitous Fate; rather, they believed in a Grand Design of which they themselves were the essential parts. Akbar was the greater of the two in that he was the Emperor, "a chosen one of Allah for ridding the world of its anomalies and imbalances." Bairam, at best, was a courtier, in

pledge to God and to himself to serve his master with devotion and faithfulness. That he strayed away from the path of duty in the last few months of his tempestuous career is a commentary on the convulsions through which the royal court passed after the death of Humayun.

## Rupmati's Ultimate Sacrifice

At eighteen, Akbar had blossomed into a handsome youth full of verve and a zest for dangerous living. His strength was Herculean. While on his way to Delhi from Lahore,\* he broke away from the main force near Hisar-Firoza to hunt. The thick forests abounded with what Abul Fazl calls "the kings and queens of the jungle," and Akbar wanted to meet them on their own ground. In later years, he confessed to having been "overpowered by a feeling that a king has no right to rule unless he can prove himself superior in physical strength and intellect to all sentient beings." Akbar had heard about the ferocity of the man-eating cheetah, and was keen to test his strength against this wily beast. He disdained the use of the usual traps and subterfuges to catch or kill it, and entered the vast, sprawling forests equipped only with the weapons of hand-to-hand combat. In vain did the professional shikaris try to dissuade him from this neglect of caution. Akbar was determined to expose himself to the maximum danger in order to measure his strength and, "to gauge the depth of God's love and solicitude for him." A small contingent of armed men followed the Emperor's party.

The eleven-day trek through the jungle turned out to be a saga of courage and adventure in which Akbar stood out for utter disregard of the dangers that lurked all around. Several cheetahs fell

\*Akbar left Lahore in October 1560, reached Delhi on 24 November, then proceeded to Agra by water, reaching there on 31 December.

to the blows of Akbar's sword. The bag included, among other less treacherous beasts, one lion and three tigers. The young monarch was in his element. He spent nights in tents pitched in the dense forest. After dusk, fires were lit in a circle around the royal camp, and trumpets were sounded to proclaim truce for the night. The cup then went around, and Akbar not unoften partook of the choicest Persian and Indian wines. He drank heartily right from his early youth. Both his father Humayun and grandfather Babar sought in *soma* the solace they needed in their tempestuous lives. But Akbar could stay away from it for weeks and months; and then would suddenly remember his date with Bacchus, and hold glittering wine parties for days on end. Like Babar and Humayun, he had a dual personality—one sobre and sedate, and the other intensely committed to sensual pleasures. It seemed that a battle royal raged within him between these two parts of his self. Neither was able to gain complete mastery over the other. This conflict, which in fact was a search for the ultimate reality, continued till the end of his days. He was a toper and a *tapaswi* in turn. In his youth, when the flames of flesh leapt high and bright, Akbar was a libertine obsessed with sex and other forms of sensuality. It was later in life that he became an earnest inquirer into the nature of truth.

Love of music was part of his maturation. Wherever he went, be it a hunt or a holiday up the beauty spots of the hills, famed singers went with him. Very often, he would sit through the night till dawn listening to them, and begin a strenuous day.

Freed from the oppressive control of Bairam Khan, Akbar for a while used his freedom to satisfy the demands of what Badaouni calls his "lower lack-lustre self." On reaching Agra, he celebrated his independence in the traditional Mughal manner. Abul Fazl:

The wounded ones of the age obtained healing plasters. The market of justice grew brisk. Fortune embraced the truthful, and a time of joy came to the good. The sapling of royal munificence grew rapidly in height and strength. The bud of prestige began to expand. The world-adoring mind of the Shahinshah gave its attention to the education of the spiritual and temporal world under the guise of inattention. He took up his abode in the fort, which is the best building in the city. The foundations of delightful buildings were laid. The city soon came to

acquire a look of jannat. Happiness came to be write large on the faces of the poor and indigent. The days of uncertainty were over. The great Mughal had taken the reins of government in his own blessed hands. Peace returned to the world.

The palace of Bairam Khan was given over to Munim Khan, a soldier-cum-statesman who stood firmly by the side of Babar and Humayun in the days of their adversity. Age did not blunt the faithfulness that marked his long career. He was near seventy when Akbar chose him to be the Prime Minister—an act of trust that reflected the correctness of the young monarch's instincts. Maham Anaga, whose influence over Akbar was second to none after the ouster of Bairam Khan, was keen to see her son Adham Khan\* installed as the first minister of state, but Akbar did not succumb to her influence. His choice fell on Munim Khan. As Governor of Kabul, the Khan had given a good account of himself. His record of service was clean and impressive. Though he lacked the spark of genius that distinguished Bairam Khan as an administrator, yet he was endowed in ample measure with the quality of leadership that Akbar looked for and admired.

Akbar did the new Vakil the honour of attending a party given by the latter to mark the success of Imperial forces in the campaign against Bairam Khan. Dignitaries from all principalities responded to the Prime Minister's invitation. It was perhaps the first time that several Hindu chieftains gathered in the capital to affirm their loyalty to the Mughal head of government. The function, held on 11 January—the day of the Hindu festival of Lohri—was a glittering affair made memorable by its secular nature. Munim Khan seemed to have a premonition of the shape of things to come, and it needs to be recorded to his credit that he read correctly the ideas about the equality of religions that were gradually taking shape in the mind of the Emperor. Akbar was delighted to meet the “representatives of many communities inhabiting the sultanat,” and complimented Munim Khan in the open court at what he called the ingenuity of his initiative.

The astute Maham Anaga took the hint, and soon after arranged a feast to celebrate the marriage of her elder son, Baqi Muham-

\*Adham Khan was the second son of Maham Anaga. Her first son was Baqi Muhammad Khan, a man of little learning and less integrity.

mad Khan with the sister of the wife of Adham Khan. The festivities arranged by her were a carbon copy, but a faint one, of those put up by Munim Khan. The Emperor was present, by special invitation, at the exclusive women's functions held on the third and fifth days of the week-long celebrations. Though it is not recorded by any historian, it may not be a wrong surmise that it was at these get-togethers that he for the first time set his eyes at close quarters on young Rajput princesses dressed in their traditional, colourful attires. The exquisite beauty of an unmarried sister of the Raja of a tiny state to the south of Delhi held Akbar spellbound; he stood talking to her for more time than what was considered appropriate. Maham, guessing the thoughts of her hot-blooded foster-son, intervened to introduce to him a group of the bride's close relatives. This interruption only whetted the King's curiosity, and the next morning he sent a word to the Raja suggesting "high honours and liberal rewards" if he agreed to give him his sister in marriage. The princess entered Akbar's harem a week later. On this comparatively less publicised alliance perhaps, rests the foundation of the liberalism for which Akbar later became famous throughout the world.

As stated earlier, this was a period (1560-61) of change in Akbar's life. Though formally he had taken the reins of government in his hands, yet the real centre of power lay in the palace of Maham Anaga and her son Adham Khan. Even Munim Khan was helpless against the wiles of the king's foster-mother. Her word had the authority of law. Akbar was aware of the dual nature of the administration, but he was still too preoccupied with what Abul Fazl calls "the attractions of the outdoor life" to overthrow the petticoat government that had taken charge of the affairs of state. At times, Munim Khan protested against interference from the ladies of the palace, but to no avail. Akbar was not yet ready to be his own master. A prisoner of the flesh, he spent nearly all his time either in the company of women or listening to the tales of their loves and lusts. The story of the charm and intellect of a nineteen-year-old Hindu dancing girl of Saharanpur was at that time widely current in northern India. She was ravishingly beautiful—"more beautiful than the moon, the tulip and the early dawn of the spring." Folk songs about the irresistible nature of her looks were sung by bards in villages and in the streets of Agra and Delhi:



To see her is to fall in love, and to drink a drop of wine from the flask of her lustrous eyes is to be transported to the cosiest corner of the heaven. To be with her even for a moment is to taste immortality. She is great, she is pure, she is Divine. God makes the like of her only once in a million years.

Akbar heard this song one evening while he was visiting incognito the slums of western Agra. The melody gripped him. The bearded blind performer rendered the verses in a rich baritone voice made richer by the maturity of his age. A group of young men clustered around him, and listened with joy and wonderment. Some of them took up the refrain, and sang it over and over again in low notes. The gradually thickening darkness lent a peculiar pathos to the backdrop of huts and high minarets of a mosque that dominated the scene. Akbar was enthralled; spontaneously, he joined the group, and strated to hum with gusto the stanzas of the lilting lyric. A man in saffron clothes recognized him, and whispered his discovery in the ears of those standing close to him. Akbar rolled his eyes and twitched his facial muscles in the manner of a magician, and thus succeeded in putting the curious off the scent. A hasty retreat through the maze of narrow streets was eventless except for an encounter with a eunuch of the royal harem. The latter recognized the Emperor, bowed low, and went his way only when the Emperor gestured with authority that he should be left alone. The slave received a cash reward of a hundred *ashrafis* the next day. The young monarch was pleased at the high fidelity of his perception.

The words and refrain of the song kept on ringing in Akbar's ears for months. When told that the lyric was in praise of the dancing girl Rupmati his curiosity was further aroused and he ordered that "this paragon of beauty should be brought to the court for receiving high honours and rewards at my hands." The yearning to set his eyes on what had gradually become the object of his heart turned into red-hot rage when he was told that Rupmati was already in the harem of Baz Bahadur, the pleasure-seeking ruler of the fertile, semi-independent kingdom of Malwa. Akbar was born not to have a no in reply to any of his demands. He ordered an invasion—the first one of his long career—of the plateau in case Baz Bahadur refused to surrender Rupmati voluntarily.

The relationship between the talented, fun-seeking Baz Bahadur and Rupmati had developed into a saga of unparalleled love in the history of the royal houses of Hindustan. There was thus no question of acceptance by Baz Bahadur of the Mughal demand. Though principally a man of peace, he decided to resist aggression even if it meant the loss of his life and throne. No price, he declared, was too high to pay to protect the honour of one "whose loyalty can be matched only by the favour of her love and the sublimity of her personality." His famous pledge that no one, howsoever mighty, would ever separate him from one he declared to be the queen of his heart became a popular refrain for songs sung all over Malwa. People of all religions rallied to his side to fight the Mughals. "The honour of our kingdom is at stake. We must fight to the bitter end. The valley of the Vindhya is our sacred trust; its traditions and cultural values are the essence of our being. The land of the great Vikramaditya and Raja Bhoj and later of Hoshang Shah and Muhammad Khilji must be saved from the lusts of a power-drunk prince. Unity is the crying need of the hour. Let us not falter in our resolve to safeguard our borders. Truth is on our side. . . ." So read in part a proclamation issued at Mandau when it became known that a large Mughal army under Adham Khan was advancing fast to achieve with force what Akbar had failed to get by threats and persuasion.

Baz Bahadur was endowed with a complex personality: he was docile as a dove when the artist in him was in control, but when aroused to anger he brought to bear the fierceness of Tartars in settling his affairs. He came to the throne after putting to death his popular younger brother at Ujjain in 1556. His father, Shujat Khan, a Sur Pathan, was handpicked by Sher Shah for the prestigious post of Governor of Malwa following the ouster of Humayun. He was stern in putting down local insurrections, and made a name for himself as an administrator of implacable will-power. Baz Bahadur inherited from his father the flair for blood-letting, and trampled underfoot without compunction such elements as dared to question his authority. But the occasions on which the ferocious in him went into play were very few indeed. Normally, he was an ease-loving individual preoccupied with wine, women and music—the three principal sources of amusement for an eastern monarch in medieval times.

Baz Bahadur's love of music came to him perhaps from his

mother, a versatile lady of Khilji extraction, well-versed in classical Hindustani music. She christened her son Mulla Bayazid in deference to a family teacher who gave her instruction in religion and fine arts. Baz Bahadur was a title Bayazid gave himself on ascending the throne. From his childhood, Bayazid displayed an extraordinary facility in reciting the Quran. His aptitude for music was spotted early by Shujat Khan, who arranged for him to join the select band of promising singers at the court of Muhammad Shah Adil.\* Tansen was one of that group. Bayazid's progress was remarkable, and soon rose to the rank of an *ustad*. He became famous throughout Malwa for his soul-stirring renderings of the complex *ragas* and *ragnis*. Not only was he a noted vocalist, but a front-rank instrumentalist as well. His performances on the *tabla* won high praise from Adali himself.

A man of considerable learning, Bayazid later in life composed a volume of love songs in Hindi which became popular throughout central India. Even to this day, his compositions are sung at festivals at Indore, Gwalior, Bhopal and other cultural centres in the region. His intense love for Rupmati became a legend in his lifetime, and served to arouse Akbar's jealousy. To possess Rupmati became for him an obsession too strong to overpower.

Outwardly, wars are waged over causes, seldom over women. So Akbar decided to mount an invasion of Malwa to "rid the country of the injustices committed by its ruler." Abul Fazl does the diabolical act of calling Baz Bahadur "a scoundrel who lived in the fool's paradise of a drunkard," and goes on to say:

This man did not concern himself with public affairs. He was immersed in brutal follies and bestial pleasures. The cup was his constant companion. He drank continually without distinguishing night from day or day from night. Music and melody, which the wise and farsighted have employed at times as a means of lightening the over-burdened mind, were regarded by this degenerate as serious business, and he spent on them all his precious hours. In the arrogance of infatuation, he wrought works of inauspiciousness, and brought incalculable misery on the poverty-stricken people of his state.

\*Muhammad Shah Adil, popularly known as Adali, was himself a musician of high merit. He made it a point to give instruction personally to young promising artists.

A cause having been invented, the invading force came to be called an army of liberation. Adham Khan and Pir Muhammad—two of the most sanguine soldiers in the realm—were commissioned to “bring peace and justice to the harassed people of the principality and to bring them under the protection of the Mughal umbrella.”

Undaunted, Baz Bahadur made ready to meet the challenge, placed Rupmati and other ladies of the harem in the charge of trusted noblemen with instructions that in the event of defeat they should, in accordance with Indian tradition, be “despatched to heaven,” and that in no case were they to be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy. The two armies clashed near Sarangpur. The Mughals won the day. Baz Bahadur\* fled to the hills nearby. The protectors of the harem unsheathed their swords and, in the name of God and chastity, went about their gruesome task of severing the heads of their fair charges. The slash at Rupmati’s neck failed to extinguish the life-spark within. She was badly cut, but did not die. Perhaps her executioner could not muster enough callousness to strike at her a second time. The pathos in her beautiful eyes was a shield that saved her. She was quickly transported to the safety of a remote, unkempt corner of the fort. When Adham Khan came to know of the “mass immolations,” he despaired of capturing Rupmati alive. However, hoping against hope, he sent five hundred men to search every nook and corner of the citadel. Rupmati, in the meantime, had done the ultimate heroic act of ending her life by taking the poison she hid under her bodice. So died Rupmati—a symbol of faithfulness. She will live in the hearts of the people of Hindustan for as long as love continues to fashion the lives of humankind.

Adham Khan, a devil incarnate, then set about satisfying his lust for loot and animal pleasures. The havoc he wrought is best

\*Baz Bahadur took refuge in Khandesh. Within a year, he regained control of Malwa with the help of the ruler of that Kingdom. Akbar’s Uzbek general, Abdulla Khan, once again drove him out of Malwa a year later. Thereafter, he remained in exile, at the courts of various princes. In 1571, he finally surrendered. Akbar treated him with honour, and appointed him a *Mansabdar* of one thousand. Shortly afterwards, he was promoted to the rank of two thousand. When he died he was buried by the side of Rupmati at Ujjain. Their tomb, located in the middle of a lake, is a popular rendezvous for lovers from all over the country.

told in the words of Abul Fazl:

When Baz Bahadur had fled, Adham Khan came in all haste and excitement to Sarangpur to seize the buried and other treasures, and the seraglio with its singers and dancers whose beauty and melody were celebrated throughout the world, and whose heart-ravishing charms were sung of in streets and markets. He took possession of all Baz Bahadur's property, including his concubines and dancing girls, and sent people to search for Rupmati. When this news reached her ear, her faithful blood became aglow, and for the love of Baz Bahadur she bravely quaffed the cup of deadly poison and carried her honour to the hidden chambers of annihilation.

When Adham Khan had become victorious, his innate egotism increased, and whatever Pir Muhammad Khan, his disinterested preacher, said to him in the way of advice was unheeded.

Adham Khan reserved for himself all the rare and exquisite articles, as well as the stores and buried treasures which were the collections of ages, and many of the famous dancing girls and beauties whose loveliness and grace were talked about in all the nine heavens, as well as many singers and musicians, and occupied himself with delights and pleasures.

Rupmati's death stunned Akbar. He cared little for the vast treasures that Adham Khan had captured. The riches of Malwa did not interest him. The object of his heart eluded him, and he was distressed at the thought that never, never shall he be able to satisfy his yearning to have a look at her. His disappointment turned into anger against Adham Khan. Not caring for the rash of pimples on the face that had kept him in bed for weeks, he decided to go to Malwa himself, take stock of the circumstances in which Rupmati had died, and punish those found guilty of neglect and reported excesses against the inmates of Baz Bahadur's harem. He left Agra in a huff on 27 April 1561. A small but highly mobile army accompanied him. He did not wish to be encumbered with the usual paraphernalia of a full-size expeditionary force as that would hamper speed and delay justice. The dash to Sarangpur was historic in that it was the first time he displayed the Babarian (or call it Napaleonic) virtue of subordinating

thought to action. He did the long, hazardous journey through forbidding forests in sixteen days—a feat that took Adham Khan completely by surprise.

Akbar's first act after being welcomed by Adham Khan and Pir Muhammad was to visit the room in which Rupmati had died. He stood there, perhaps debating within himself on the reality of life and death, on God and the manifestations of His will, and may be on the transitoriness of the world itself. It was here that he realized for the first time the glory of self-effacement as a means to protect one's honour—a realization that gave him respect for the code of Hindu moral values.

Thus chastened, Akbar applied himself to solving the problems of conquest that the Mughal victory had given rise to. Adham Khan was the villain of the piece: his egotism and sensuality had bred dissatisfaction all around. Akbar was horrified to learn of the atrocities committed by him. The abduction and rape of two "feather-framed fairies of Baz Bahadur's seraglio" was a crime that Akbar was in no mood to condone. Maham Anaga feared the worst, and she surreptitiously had the two women murdered before the Emperor had a chance to question them. "A severed head makes no sound," she later explained to a close confidant. Maham also pleaded with Akbar on behalf of her son, and succeeded in securing for him a general pardon. Akbar left him in command of the victorious army. Pir Muhammad was, however, instructed to keep a watch over Adham's activities. The properties and treasures seized by him were confiscated. At one stage, the disgraced general harboured thoughts of rebellion, but Maham counselled peace and patience. She knew that Akbar could be prevailed upon at a suitable time to condone his lapses. Her assessment proved to be correct.

On return to Agra, the Emperor once again came under the spell of Maham's flattering tongue. For all intents and purposes, he forgave Adham Khan for the sins he had committed against the people of Malwa, and went to the length of complimenting him publicly for inflicting a crushing defeat on Baz Bahadur. Rupmati was soon forgotten. Her place was taken by a Rajput princess of exquisite grace and charm.

Akbar returned to Agra after an absence of thirty-eight days. On the way, he hunted, and once did the remarkable feat of killing a tiger with a single swipe of his sword. Thereafter, stories of his physical prowess and fearlessness gained wide currency. A

popular folk-song ran:

Akbar is great; Akbar has no fear in his heart; tigers and lions tremble at his approach; he is generous; he is a protector of the poor, a Messiah comes to wipe the tears of the indigent; his sword is sharper and brighter than the lightning, his mace heavier and more deadly than that of Rustam; he is truly the emperor of the world; the like of him has not walked the plains of Hindustan before. We salute him as the greatest of all kings.

Akbar had come into his own. Already he was a legend, a man with a halo around his head. Hindustan had long waited for a Padshah broad in outlook and plenteous in human sympathies. The Akbar era had begun. There was no mistaking the extraordinary qualities he was endowed with.

Religion as such did not attract Akbar. Religious men did. The *Durgah* of Khwaja Mueen-ud-Din Chishti at Ajmer was a place of pilgrimage not only for Muslims but for all those who rated spirit above matter. Tens of thousands of the saint's devotees from all over Hindustan gathered annually at the shrine to do him homage and draw inspiration from his selfless devotion to God. Akbar, in search of what Abul Fazl calls a physician of the soul, decided to visit the holy city and offer prayers at the tomb. At this time of his spiritual development, Akbar seemed to be groping for something; he did not know what. As is customary in Hindustan, he did the last stage of the pilgrimage on foot. Men and women gathered in their thousands to see an Emperor walk up to the sacred shrine and bend his knees in submission to one who, to quote Badouni, was "a prince in poverty, a man of God who scoffed riches to build in himself an empire of Truth." The occasion was truly memorable: Akbar opened the floodgates of generosity, walked barefoot the streets of Ajmer, fed the poor with his own hands, listened to their grievances and ordered redress on the spot wherever possible, appended to the shrine extensive lands for its upkeep, honoured its keepers with rewards of cash and grants of robes of distinction. Never before had Ajmer witnessed a burst of benevolence like this. People cried when Akbar prepared to leave after a week-long stay in the city. The shouts of "God is great" rent the air as the Emperor, clad in white cotton, came out of the

tomb after doing the last obeisance. The first stage of the return journey was again performed on foot. Reverence for the Khwaja could not have been given a more eloquent expression.

The heavenly reward was not long in coming. At the halfway stage, the royal party was met and welcomed by Raja Bihari Mal of Jaipur. Regional rivalries led this much-harassed Rajput prince to seek a military alliance with the Mughals, and in pledge of his loyalty he offered his eldest daughter, Jodha Bai, in marriage to Akbar. The Emperor, still under the spiritual spell of Ajmer, thought the offer part of some grand design of the Khwaja, and accepted it without hesitation. Some *umra* were sceptical of the wisdom of such an alliance, but they dared not express themselves openly against it. Akbar's mind was made up. He envisioned in the marriage an opportunity to break down the barriers of religion, and to build an empire based on the support of all communities. The wedding took place a few weeks later (February 1562) at Sambhar. Jodha Bai entered the harem as a Hindu, not as a Muslim. The insistence on conversion was waived at the instance of her father. A small, exquisite temple was built within the four walls of the fort; she went there every morning to pray and also perhaps to underline her identity as a proud Rajputni. Akbar respected her religious sentiments, and later himself adopted some facets of Hindu worship. He was a true believer—benevolent, understanding, tolerant and full of admiration for all religions.

With a blue-blooded Rajput princess in the harem, there came about a radical change in the style of life in the palace and at the court. Jodha Bai was as good looking as she was tactful. Warm-hearted liberalism added lustre to her physical charm. Akbar respected her. So did everybody else. Maham Anaga, in particular, became very fond of her. Soon she became a centre around which the life in the palace revolved. Akbar often consulted her on important matters; her responses were invariably high-minded and above partisanship. An equation of complete trust gradually developed between the two. The future greatness of Akbar was in no small measure due to the large-heartedness of Jodha Bai. With a lesser person in her place, the story of the reign of Akbar might have been different.

Raja Man Singh, nephew and adopted son of Raja Bhagwan



Das,\* was the heir of Raja Bihari Mal. It was at the instance of Jodha Bai that he was inducted to the court at Agra—an event that turned out to be of considerable historical importance. An Akbar without Man Singh at his side is unthinkable. The two of them made a team that was as effective in war as in peace. The Rajput equanimity and single-minded devotion were the assets the Emperor came to prize the most.

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\*Raja Bhagwan Das, eldest son of Raja Bihari Mal, later rose to the rank of Amir-ul-Umra at Akbar's court.

## Complete Emancipation

Malwa was a landmark in Akbar's life. During his four-day stay at Sarangpur, he realized for the first time that loyalties were thin, and that even the Ataka Khail (foster-family battalion) could not be depended upon for the kind of devotion which Bairam Khan had shown. He suspected that Adham Khan had planned to murder him the night he (Akbar) slept in the open on the terrace of the palace at Sarangpur. The role of Maham Anaga in trying to cover up the barbarities of her son also jolted Akbar out of his complacency. In particular, he was offended at the manner in which she engineered the murder of two innocent women of Baz Bahadur's harem. Her concern for Adham, it became clear to him, was more compelling than her responsibilities as the *de facto* first minister. Akbar pondered over these disquieting realities without sharing his thoughts with anyone. Instead, he waited for the right moment to initiate cleaning operations.

The seventeen-day journey from Sarangpur to Agra was eventless except, as has already been stated, for some daring feats of big-game hunting. Bouts of heavy drinking perhaps helped eradicate fear from his heart. But still he underwent spells of doubt in regard to his ability to manage things by himself. Abul Fazl, however, insists that "the Shahinshah's seeming indifference to the affairs of state was a divinely-inspired move to checkmate those who equated responsibilities with self-interest." He underlines time and again that Akbar knew all, and that whatever he did or did not do was divinely inspired. His sustained eulogy is unconvincing.

The fact seems that the overpowering pulls of sensuality prevented Akbar from asserting himself with definiteness. According to Laurence Binyon, he had at this time nearly five thousand women in his harem.\*

On reaching Agra, he found that the *Vakil*, Munim Khan, had virtually abdicated his powers in favour of Maham Anaga, and that administration was in a shambles. So were the finances. Absence of a centre of authority bred revolt and lawlessness. Partisanship ran riot. All key posts were filled by mediocrities willing to toe the Maham line. Reports also came from Malwa that Adham Khan had assumed the role of an unprincipled autocrat, and that he was trampling underfoot not only the traditional canons of justice but the principles of moral decency as well. Akbar could ignore these ominous signals only at his own peril.

One evening, apparently disturbed at the news of a rebellion in the vicinity of Agra, Akbar repaired to his favourite retreat in a forest, and began looking inwards to find a solution to the dissatisfaction gathering around him. His return after thirty-six hours marked the beginning of the end of what Badauni calls the "unruly reign of the unprincipled, power-hungry, palace princesses." Akbar's first act was to issue orders, without consulting either Maham or Munim Khan, for the recall of Adham Khan. Pir Muhammad Khan, a one-time tutor of Akbar, was appointed Governor in his place. The woman's instinct forewarned Maham about the change in Akbar's mood, and she wrote to the Emperor:

I have just learnt about Your Majesty's decision to recall Adham Khan from Malwa. The presence of my son in Agra will indeed be a solace to me, especially when the advancing years are impinging upon my health. May God's blessings be always with you. The great Mulla\*\* should be able, under Your Majesty's guidance, to manage successfully the affairs of a turbulent part of our rapidly growing empire. He is wise and experienced. The local chieftains, I feel confident, will give him their support. However, I would like to have an opportunity to discuss with Your Majesty

\*This fact is also casually mentioned by Abul Fazl. Perhaps the number represented the total population of seraglio, including servants, nautch-girls and others assigned duties inside the *zenana*.

\*\*Pir Muhammad Khan was invariably referred to by Maham Anaga and some others as the Mulla.

certain important matters bearing on this change of stewardship. May Allah protect Your Majesty to rule over the Empire till eternity.

Akbar's mind was made up. He did not reply to Maham's request for an audience. The *zenana* was no longer to be permitted to interfere in state affairs. Maham knew her game was up, but she hoped, in desperation, to regain her influence by means more foul than she had used hitherto. She waited anxiously for the arrival of Adham Khan. She was loth to admit defeat for as long as she had the faintest hope of victory. Maham was a wily person. She waited patiently for an opportunity to catch Akbar on the wrong foot.

A still bigger and more crucial change in administration was up the Emperor's sleeve. He recalled the everloyal Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan Ataka\* from Punjab, gave him the title of Khan-i-Azim, and made him Prime Minister. The ageing Munim Khan was hurt at his supersession, but he decided to lie low till the Emperor played some more cards and gave a more definite clue to the contours of his changing personality.

This appointment galled Maham more than it did Munim Khan. Her hostility to the Ataka was common knowledge. She did not approve of the part he played in securing a general pardon for Bairam Khan after the latter's defeat in Punjab. Then there was jealousy. The Ataka's wife, Jiji Anaga, was her junior in rank and status. Maham was on the verge of tears when on 16 May 1562, Shams-ud-Din became the head of government. In the meantime, her fractious son, Adham, had arrived from Sarangpur. The two began scheming to find out the best means to get rid of the new chief. Munim Khan gave them his tacit support. So did Shahab-ud-Din Khan, a relative of Maham, who had earlier held for a short while the much sought-after Prime Ministership. Here was a foursome determined to oust the Ataka by means fair or foul. Akbar sensed their plottings, but he was by nature reluctant to use violent measures to get rid of his opponents. "Evil," he observed later, "crumbles under its own weight." But if persuasion were to fail, he would use the sword as the final arbiter.

\*Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan Ataka was the husband of Akbar's wet nurse, Jiji Anaga. He saved Humayun's life following the Mughal defeat at Qanauj.

Though the four in all likelihood conspired, they might not have contemplated direct violence against the Ataka. Maham's instincts and Munim Khan's age would be against that course. Adham Khan perhaps disagreed, but in the end recognised the wisdom of his mother's tactics. Shahab-ud-Din Khan was one of those faint-hearted persons who invariably went along with the majority. They perhaps also took some other known opponents of the Khan-i-Azam into confidence, and enlisted their support with promises of rich rewards after the coup was successful. Gradually, the number of the conspirators swelled to a point where the plot could no longer be kept a well-guarded secret. The fear of being found out led to desperation, and the hawks—chief among them Adham Khan—took over. What followed has been described graphically by Abul Fazl:

On a court-day Munim Khan, Ataka Khan, Shahab-ud-Din Ahmad Khan and other magnates were sitting in the royal hall and transacting public business when Adham Khan suddenly entered in a riotous manner, attended by others more riotous than himself. The members of the assembly rose up to do him honour and the Ataka Khan rose half-up.

Immediately upon entering, Adham Khan put his hand to his dagger and went towards the Ataka Khan. Then he angrily signalled to his servant Khusham Khan Uzbek and the other desperadoes saying: 'Why do you stand still?' The wicked Khusham drew his dagger and inflicted a dangerous wound on the breast of the Ataka who, thoroughly amazed, ran towards the door of the hall. Immediately thereon, Khuda Bardi came and struck him twice with a sword. That great man was martyred in the courtyard of the hall of audience.

A loud cry arose in the palace on account of this outrage. That doomed one, in spite of his past audacity, presumptuously advanced towards the sacred harem with evil intentions. His Majesty the Shahinshah had gone to sleep in the palace, but his fortune was awake. That black-fated one went up, sword in hand, from the hall to the terrace which went round the palace on all four sides. He tried to go inside but Niamat, the eunuch, who was standing near the entrance, immediately shut the door and bolted it. And though Adham Khan spoke roughly to Niamat and bade him open the door, the latter did not do so. Those stand-

ing by took no action. Why did they not shed his blood? If they had not the courage for that, why did they not make a general rush and surround him? It is difficult to believe that among those present in the palace there was no one who was loyal. Apparently, there was a divine design behind the whole affair.

In short, His Majesty was awakened by the dreadful clamour and called for explanation. As none of the women knew of the affair, he put his head outside of the palace wall and asked what was the matter. Rafiq, a *muhasib*, who was one of the old servants of the palace, mentioned the facts. When His Majesty heard the horrible tale, he was amazed and made further inquiries. Rafiq pointed to the blood-stained corpse and repeated his statement. When His Majesty saw the body, he became indignant. From a divine inspiration, he did not come out by the door where Adham was standing and mediating evil, but by another way. As he was coming out, an attendant handed him the royal scimitar. His Majesty took the scimitar and went on. When he had passed over one side of the terrace and had turned into another, he saw that villain, and there issued from his holy lips the words 'son of a fool, why have you killed our Ataka?' At this, Adham had the audacity to seize His Majesty's hands and to say 'Inquire, and do not prejudge.'

At last His Majesty freed them from the grasp of that wicked one, and struck him such a blow on the face with his fist that wicked monster fell down unconscious.

Farhat Khan and Sangram Husnak were present. His Majesty angrily said to them, 'Why do you stand gasping there? Bind this madman.' They two and a number of others obeyed the order and bound him. His Majesty gave order that the fellow should be flung headlong from the top of the terrace. The order was duly carried but Adham remained half-alive. The order was given to bring him up again. They dragged him up by the hair and in accordance with the orders flung him down headlong again. Adham's neck was broken. In this way that blood-thirsty profligate underwent retribution for his actions.

In his description of the outrage, Abul Fazl has asked some pertinent questions: Why did not the dignitaries assembled in the hall and the guards in the palace take any action against Adham

Khan? Why did they stand still till the Emperor himself came out to deal with the culprit? It is unlikely that the whole lot of them—ministers and men on guard—were in league with Adham Khan, and that they were all co-conspirators in the murder of the Ataka. The only reasonable conjecture is that they were dumbfounded at the suddenness of the assault, and that they hesitated to lay their hands on the son of the much-feared Maham Anaga.

Akbar himself went to inform Maham of what had happened. He did not tell the whole story, restricting himself to saying: "Adham murdered the Ataka; we have punished him suitably." Not realizing the implication of the disclosure, the ailing lady could only manage to say: "Your Majesty did well." The next morning, an old servant Najiba Begum mustered courage to tell her mistress the whole truth. At first, Maham would not believe that her son was dead, and sent messengers to the palace to ascertain facts. Confirmation of Najiba Begum's version was "an arrow that pierced the Anaga right through the heart." She was disconsolate and cried aloud to mourn her loss. Akbar came to console her: "We too are grieved at what has happened. In Adham we have lost a brother, and in the Ataka a loyal counsellor. God willed it that way. We are all instruments of His wishes. Grieve not, dear mother. The state is bigger than any individual. We are pledged to safeguard it."

After the religious ceremonies were performed, both the bodies were sent to Delhi for burial in the precincts of the tomb of Humayun. Maham wanted to accompany her son's body, but the royal hakim dissuaded her from undergoing the strain of a hundred-mile journey. The parting scene was heart-rending:

Maham came out of her room to bid farewell to the mortal remains of her son. Her wailings were loud and soulful. Tears came out of her eyes in torrents. She shrieked, she moaned, and she pulled at her hair in agony. When the body wrapped in a white *Kaffan* was brought to her she stepped forward to put her arms around it. She gave it a gentle kiss, and then sagged to the ground overwhelmed with sorrow. The ladies in attendance comforted her, and lifted her bodily to carry her to her room. Everybody present was stricken with grief at the plight of the old lady. They all cried in sympathy. A pall of sorrow enveloped her quarters when the body started on its journey to Delhi.

For many days, Maham did not come out of her apartment. Her ailment—an affliction of the bowels—worsened. Akbar visited her many times, and urged the physicians to leave nothing undone to cure her. However, their efforts failed. She died forty days after Adham. The Emperor was struck dumb with sorrow at the passing away of “one who had nursed him with love and affection at a time when neither father nor mother was there to look after him.” The Emperor ordered that her body should also be taken to Delhi for burial. He himself became a pall-bearer for the first stage of the last journey. A beautiful tomb was ordered to be built over her grave near the Qutab. Adham Khan’s body was also buried by her side.

Fearing Akbar’s wrath, Munim Khan and Shahab-ud-Din Khan fled the capital the day Ataka was stabbed to death. Their whereabouts remained unknown for over a month. Akbar then sent a *firman* to all heads of principalities, ordering them to apprehend the fugitives and send them to Agra without delay. However, he directed that efforts should be made that no harm should come to their persons.

The result was as expected. Both the Khans came out of hiding, and surrendered themselves to the Governor in Lahore. Their complicity in the plot to kill Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan was forgiven. Munim Khan once again became Prime Minister. Akbar knew that the old man had merely been a puppet in the hands of Adham Khan. His record of loyalty was too long to be rubbed off by a single act of doubtful treachery. Akbar, like Humayun and Babar, was generous in victory. Vindictiveness was not one of his failings. To forgive was, to him, a virtue without parallel—a key to making friends of enemies and retaining them as such.

With Maham and Adham out of his way, Akbar became comparatively free to exercise his authority. A group of noblemen in sympathy with the Emperor’s ideas and aspirations was gradually emerging. They were loyal and forward-looking individuals fully aware of their obligations. Their support to Akbar was not a by-product of the cult of sycophancy so prevalent at courts in medieval times, but an affirmation of new values that were gradually taking root. Akbar thus became the leader of a movement that sought to eliminate prejudices and outdated priorities. At 21, he was groping his way towards a Utopia where humankind would be a family



knit together by common interests and allegiances. He was an illiterate insofar as he could not read or write, but he was a highly educated individual in that he reinterpreted history to chart out his policies. Akbar used his newly-won freedom to rid the people—especially the non-Muslims—of the many disabilities they had been suffering from for many centuries.

Opposition to his revolutionary views only strengthened Akbar's resolve to carry out his programme of reform without flinching. However, there were some diehards who, out of self-interest, chose to look backwards, and thus to create dissatisfaction and dissent. Once again the palace became the centre of intrigue, the man behind it all being no other than Khwaja Muazzam, half-brother of Hamida Banu Begum.\* Fretful and capricious, the Khwaja lacked stamina to sustain a design for long. Though ambitious, he lacked the craft of Maham; and the political punch of Adham.

Muazzam was a man of little talent and less discretion. His half-sister, a staunch Muslim,\*\* indirectly supported him in questioning the wisdom of Akbar's religious altruism. She, however, kept herself aloof from any studied move to pressure her son to follow the traditional Mughal policies. Unlike Maham, she was not a politician. She took pride in her lineage, and inwardly wished that Akbar would live by the traditions and religious values she inherited. She remained till the end of her days an interested but neutral spectator of the events that became a prelude to Akbar's greatness.

Muazzam's backstage dialogues with the known champions of reaction irritated the Emperor. He waited for an opportunity to call a halt to his uncle's machinations. One came in 1564. He used it with his characteristic firmness.

In March of that year, Fatima Begum, a senior lady of Humayun's harem, complained to Akbar that the life of her daughter, Zuhra Begum who was married to Muazzam, was in danger. She wrote to the Emperor:

\*Khwaja Muazzam was the son of Ali Akbar and half-brother of Akbar's mother.

\*\*Hamida Banu Begum was a Shi'ite Muslim. Though she seldom interfered in the affairs of state, she was known to look askance at Akbar's liberalism.

Your Majesty, all these years I have been suffering in silence the agonies of a lacerated heart. No longer can I keep my mouth shut about the tortures that my son-in-law and your uncle Khwaja Muazzam is inflicting upon my daughter Zuhra. Not only has she been spat at and beaten mercilessly day and night; now I understand most reliably that the Khwaja contemplates putting her to death. With that evil design, he has shifted her to a village twenty miles outside Agra. A couple of weeks back, he threatened her with torture-unto-death unless she submitted with a smile to his unnatural demands. God is my witness, O' King of Kings, that my daughter is not telling an untruth: Allah is her constant companion. She is not afraid of death. She told me not to share her secret with anyone. But, O' Protector of the poor and the aggrieved, I am a mother, and cannot let my daughter be slaughtered like a goat or a cow. With tears of blood dripping from my eyes, I beseech Your Majesty to come to the assistance of my innocent one. For all that I know, she may already have been cut to pieces. However, I am hoping that she is still alive. The Khwaja may, I am afraid, try also to silence me with the sharp edge of his sword. In the name of justice, of which you are the guardian and purveyor, I cry aloud for your protection. May God save you till eternity to rule over a people who have come to acquire faith in your generosity and sense of fair play.

This aroused Akbar to his duty. He immediately ordered twenty of his personal bodyguard to accompany him on "an important mission beyond the Jamuna." Nobody knew about the destination or purpose of the small expedition. A few court officials were told that the Emperor was going on a hunt. Akbar, riding his favourite horse Rahbar reached the vicinity of the village in less than an hour. Therefrom he sent a messenger to inform Khwaja Muazzam that his sovereign was coming to see him. The Khwaja, raving like a madman, hurled abuse and a bloodstained dagger at the messenger: he had that very moment stabbed Zuhra to death. The messenger Ali Jawaid rushed back to inform the Emperor of the foul deed. Akbar was horrified. Not heeding danger, he galloped away at the head of his retinue, and pulled rein only when some armed servants of the Khwaja barred his way to the gate of the house. Akbar, in a loud voice, ordered them to get out of his way.

The royal command went unheeded. A scuffle ensued in which a particularly defiant hireling of the Khwaja was cut to pieces. Muazzam himself offered resistance, but he was soon overpowered and bound in chains. Akbar rushed inside to find out if Zuhra was dead. To his horror, he found her naked body lifeless and drenched in blood. Boiling with rage, he ordered that the Khwaja, along with his mercenaries, be thrown into the Jamuna. "Let the hungry crocodiles make a meal of him," he roared. As luck would have it, Muazzam did not drown. Later, he was sent to prison in the fort at Gwalior. A couple of years later, he died insane.

The fate that overtook Muazzam not only enhanced Akbar's reputation as one whom justice was above family ties; it also served as a warning to those who regarded intrigue the best and perhaps the only means for advancement. Opposition to him collapsed like a house of cards. Even Hamida Banu reconciled herself to the creed of tolerance, and engaged herself hereafter in promoting her son's ideas about religion and its place in the polity of Hindustan.

Akbar's emancipation was now complete, and he applied himself with vigour to realising in full his concept of a society based on freedom and equality. He was at least three hundred years ahead of his times.

## Defiance unto Death by Rani Durgawati

At 22, Akbar was virtually sitting on a volcano of conflict between the two clear driving powers of his self—one, the Timurid quest for sensual pleasure and the other, a much larger search for the fundamentals of good government. Women attracted him not only as a means of satisfying his irrepressible libido, but also for the spirit of self-sacrifice which they often symbolized. He believed that external beauty is a reflection of the glow of the soul within: "God is not a trickster. His moulds are cast in homogeneity, not in irreconcilables. He will be a poor Lord who practised deception, and encrusted tinsel with a plating of silver." His search for beautiful women was a deduction from this theorem about the craftsmanship of the Creator.

Akbar sent his secret agents, men, women and eunuchs, in search of feminine beauty wherever it existed. The harems of Muslim and Hindu nobles and chieftains were combed systematically. The Timurid ruling that a king was entitled to ask for the hand of the wife or daughter of any of his subjects or vassals was a sanction behind this hourie-hunt. The Iron-Limper had decreed that the husband of a lady—be she the wife of a Shaikh or a soldier—was under obligation to divorce her if the king expressed a desire to give her a place in his seraglio. Many an old family in Agra and Delhi was broken up because of Akbar's insistence on exercising his kingly prerogative in defiance of public opinion. Resentment

gradually gathered momentum. He did not realize that Hindustan was different from Central Asia.

Early in 1564, he moved to Delhi on receipt of a report that one Shaikh Obaidullah, revered by both Muslims and Hindus, had decreed the Emperor's probes as un-Islamic, and that he was leading an agitation to stop the violation of family sanctity. Akbar was determined to smash what he regarded as the villainy of a group of pseudo-religionists. The Shaikh's only wife, Sakina, was reputed to be a "fair-faced fairy who blushed at seeing her own image in the mirror," and Akbar was determined to add her to his collection. At first, the Shaikh spurned the demand, but in the end gave in for fear of incurring the Emperor's wrath. He divorced Sakina, and left for the Deccan. Akbar met "the object of his curiosity" in the private chambers of his palace inside the fort and, according to a folk-song still sung in many parts of northern India, complimented her on "the silken softness of her skin, the lustrous glow of her eyes, the graceful curves of her slender frame, and the matchless decorum of her poise and manners." For two days and nights Akbar basked uninterrupted in the sunshine of her beauty, and then decided to go on a thanksgiving pilgrimage to the shrine of Khwaja Nizam-ud-Din Auliya.

While returning from the Dargah, Akbar was hit on the right shoulder by an arrow shot from the balcony of the school founded by Maham Anaga. The Emperor rolled down the horse, but kept his composure. He himself pulled out the arrow, and remounted. Ignoring pain, he stayed on till the culprit\* was caught and cut to pieces there and then. He ignored a plea that the offender should be detained for questioning to determine the motive of the crime—a decision prompted perhaps by a desire to save himself the embarrassment of scandals involving women of respected families. Neither were any arrests made of persons suspected of planning to avenge the injustice meted out to the husband of Sakina. Akbar intuitively sensed an upsurge of opinion against his weakness for women, and longed for a curtain to be drawn over his past lapses. It is significant that never again did he give anybody

\*The name of the culprit was Faulad who, it is held by some historians, had been hired by Mirza Sharif-ud-Din, an accomplice of Shah Abdul Maali, to assassinate the Emperor.

a chance to raise an accusing finger against him. Perhaps the attempt on his life was a hidden ploy used by Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Auliya to wean him away from the path of indecency. Thereafter he divested himself of the Timurid privilege to ask innocent husbands to divorce their wives in his favour. Capture of women in war or as a means of settlement of a political dispute was a different matter.

Akbar did the return journey to Agra in two days. He rode a palanquin—perhaps for the first time in his eight years of reign—carried on the shoulders of a team of twenty-one trusted Afghan bearers. The teams changed every three hours. The sites for the royal camp at night were chosen with an eye to their scenic richness and demands of security. Two of the Emperor's personal physicians, beside his favourite wives and a bevy of nautch-girls and singers, were provided tent houses in the royal enclosure. On the fifth day, the Emperor held a wine party to which all the leading figures in the entourage were invited. "The evening merged into night and night into morning" while the Emperor sat cup in hand listening to the lyrics sung in turn by Persian and Indian singers. When one Benazir Bai of Lucknow donned the bells around her ankles, and rendered in exquisite notes a composition of Amir Khusrau, Akbar rose enchanted to pay his tribute of praise to the shapely performer. As she bowed low to acknowledge the royal compliment, Akbar slipped around her neck a chain of emeralds valued at no less than five thousand *ashrafs*. Exclamations of *marhaba, marhaba* filled the tent as she retreated respectfully to stand, head down, in a far corner. The youthful Emperor, still under the spell of Khusrau's invocations to God, beckoned her to come up and sit in the front row a few paces to the left of the royal cushion. She obeyed demurely. Except Tansen, no singer at Akbar's court was the recipient of such an honour. For years, Benazir Bai enjoyed high favour first at Agra and later in Lahore. On reaching the capital, Akbar told Munim Khan that his quick recovery was due to "the elixir of music sprinkled on his wound by Benazir, the matchless one." For many a decade, Benazir was a name respected among the famous nautch-girls of Oudh: "Benazir was truly without peer. When she sang, the sun and the moon stopped in their courses to listen to her. The great Akbar Padshah, the King of kings, rose to acknowledge her talents. She was beautiful to look at and more beautiful to listen to. The jing-

ling of bells around her ankles sent into ecstasy the gods and goddesses of the divine court." Thus runs a song sung by maidens at village fairs in northern India to the low-key accompaniment of sarangi and dholak.

It was at this time (1564) that Rani Durgawati reached the zenith of her popularity. Her rule in Gondwana\* (east-west 250 mile; north-south 120 miles) became synonymous with justice, tolerance, beneficence and patriotism. She was a heroic queen and her victories over the neighbouring states were spectacular. She led her armies personally, and the elephant was her favourite war vehicle. When clad in full armour she rode on one, the enemy read the writing on the wall, and often fled before a shot was fired. To her people, she became a symbol, a cause for which they were prepared to shed the last drop of their blood. In sixteen years since 1548 when she took the reins of government on behalf of her infant son Bir Narayan,\*\* she did not lose even one of the fifty-one wars she fought, and she treated the defeated enemy with generosity, at times bestowing upon them rich gifts and rewards. Here lay the secret of her power and popularity. The Gonds, an unsophisticated tribe proud of their bow-and-arrow culture, adored her. Everyone of their 70,000 inhabited villages was at once a bastion of defence and a cog in a hard-hitting war machine. She had at her beck and call an army of nearly 70,000 men and 2,500 elephants. She was great not only in war, but in peace as well. Efficient control and management of production in 23,000 cultivated villages gave the little kingdom self-sufficiency in food and other essential items. Durgawati knew the headmen of every village by name. She made it a point to personally look into the grievances of her subjects and give redress, where possible, on the spot. The old and the young virtually worshipped her as a goddess of justice, and frequently made visits to the capital fortress of Churugarh to steal a glimpse of their Maharani.

Durgawati was a blue-blooded princess. Her father, Raja Salbhan of Rahatgarh, traced his lineage to a "Maharaja of Maharajas" who ruled over Central India in the beginning of the

\*Roughly corresponding to the northern districts of Madhya Pradesh.

\*\*Bir Narayan was then five years' old. On reaching maturity, he left the reins of government in the hands of his popular mother.

eighth century. The sixteenth century wars against Baz Bahadur and other rulers in the region weakened his authority and drained his coffers. In desperation, he sought an alliance with the Gonds, a comparatively backward people who possessed neither riches nor the traditions of a high caste Hindu royal house. Circumstances compelled him to give his daughter in marriage to the Gond prince Ganpat Rai, son of Raja Aman Dass. Here was a marriage rooted neither in love nor in equality of status, but in the compulsions of penury. Mindful of her obligations, Durgawati applied herself to strengthening the economy and military power of Gondwana, and in the process won the respect and admiration of her people. When her husband died in 1548, she was called upon to don the mantle of regent and assume responsibility on behalf of her five-year old son to maintain the independence of the kingdom.

The ancestors of Raja Ganpat Rai had ruled over Garh-Kangra for a thousand years without a break. The Gonds, though poor, were fiercely patriotic, and considered their independence as a gift of God to be preserved at any cost. Durgawati identified herself with their aspirations and during the sixteen years of her rule as regent carved out for herself an everlasting place in the history of the kingdom.

The stories of Durgawati's heroism, especially in her wars against Baz Bahadur, aroused Akbar's curiosity. He wanted to meet her—not as an equal but in the capacity of an overlord—and bestow upon her the honours and gifts her status warranted. To that end, he sent emissaries to Churugarh, but to no avail. Durgawati refused to acknowledge Mughal suzerainty, much less travel to Agra to pay homage to the Emperor. Akbar was infuriated. He ordered one of his foremost generals, Khan Abdul Majid and Asaf Khan, to mount an invasion of Gondwana and bring the Rani, alive rather than dead, to his court.

A Tajik\* by birth, Asaf Khan was narrow-minded both in thought and application. He set out not to subdue Durgawati through tact and persuasion, but to humiliate her on the battlefield. The numerical superiority of his forces blinded him to the role of diplomacy, and he went headlong, in command of a massive force of men, horses and elephants, to drub Durgawati into

\*Tajiks were a backward, trading community of Central Asia.



submission.

Gondwana rose as one man to meet the aggression. Durgawati's soulful exhortations in the name of self-respect and justice brought tears to the eyes of her listeners, and they all swore to defend the 'matra-bhoomi' (motherland) with every resource at their disposal. Abul Fazl's account of the initial engagement (near Jubbulpore) makes interesting reading:

The Rani put armour on her breast and a helmet on her head and, mounting an elephant, slowly advanced to encounter the horses who were eager for battle. She said to her soldiers: 'Do not hasten, let the enemy enter the pass and then we shall fall upon them from all sides and drive them off.' It turned out as she anticipated. . . . The Rani was victorious and pursued the fugitives, and emerged from the ravine. At the end of the day, she summoned her chief men, and asked what they advised. Each man spoke according to his understanding and courage. The Rani expressed herself in favour of an all-out attack that very night, and thus finish off the enemy. 'Otherwise,' she said, 'Asaf Khan will come in the morning in person and take possession of the pass, and will fortify it with artillery. The task which is now easy will become difficult.' No one agreed to this proposal. When she came to the house, she proposed a night-attack to some of her devoted followers. Not one of them could equal her in courage. When it was morning, what the Rani had foreseen occurred. Asaf Khan came with artillery and fortified the entrance to the pass, forcing the victorious army to enter the mountains. The Rani, in her eagerness for battle, mounted a lofty and swift elephant (by the name of Sarnan), which was the best of her animals, and came out. She drew up her forces, distributed the elephants, and prepared for battle. After armies had encountered, the work passed from arrows and muskets to daggers and swords. Raja Bir Narayan, the Rani's son, who was the nominal ruler, behaved bravely and performed great deeds. The battle raged till the third watch of the day. Three times Raja Bir Narayan repulsed the wondrous army, and the third time he was wounded. When the Rani heard of this, she ordered trusty men to remove him from the battlefield to a palace of safety. On this account, a great many left the field of battle, and the Rani's troops were much discomfited. Not more

than three hundred men remained with her. But there was no weakening of the Rani's resolution, and she fought on alongside her gallant followers. An arrow struck her right temple. She courageously drew it out and flung it away from her. But the arrow's point remained in the wound, and would not come out. Just then another arrow struck her neck. That too she drew out, but the excessive pain made her swoon. When gradually she recovered her senses, she said to a devoted aide: 'My faithful friend, now is the time to do me service. God forbid that I be overcome in name and honour and I fall into the hands of the enemy. Act now like a faithful servant, and dispose of me by this sharp dagger.' He said: 'How can I bring my hand to do this thing? How can the hand which has held your gifts do such a dreadful deed? This I can do: I can carry you away from the fatal field. I have full confidence in this swift elephant.' When the Rani heard these words, she grew angry and reprimanded him, saying: 'Do you choose such a disgrace for me?' Then she drew her dagger, and inflicted the blow herself.

Thus died Rani Durgawati—brave, fearless, and faithful to the end to the norms of chastity set by her dynasty. Her example spurred her followers to perform deeds of incredible valour. One of them carried her body beyond Asaf Khan's reach despite a virtual wall of steel that surrounded the remnants of the defeated army. Fire reduced her to ashes before the Mughals knew where she was.

Asaf Khan rushed to lay siege to the fort at Churugarh. The wounded Bir Narayan put up a strong resistance and died fighting. When it became clear that the fort could not be held for long, the ladies of the royal family and wives and daughters and other female relatives of the nobles marched solemnly to a pre-arranged enclosure for mass participation in the ceremony of jauhar. To two high-ranking officers of the Raja's court—Bhoj Kaith and Mian Bhikari—was given this grim charge. When the women had taken their assigned places on pyres an order was given to light the fires and to close the gates of the enclosure. The flames leapt skyward, consuming in a few fateful moments the cream of Gondwana's womanhood. Not a shriek, nor a moan, nor a wail was heard outside. The belief that their self-immolation

would enhance the glory of womanhood sustained their spirits.

The gates of the arena of death were opened by Asaf Khan's men when they entered the fort four days later. A miracle had happened. Two of the prettiest princesses were found alive under a log the raging fires left untouched. One was Kamlawati, sister of Rani Durgawati, and the other Ruprani, a princess of Par-gadha who was engaged to be married to Raja Bir Narayan. Both were sent to Agra. Akbar was delighted to have them, and gave the pair a place in his harem.

According to Abul Fazl, a thousand elephants and much other booty fell into the hands of the imperial forces. The wealth of gold and precious stones in the castle dazzled Asaf Khan's eyes. An underground strong-room contained, besides treasures of ancient gold ornaments, one hundred jars of gold coins of the Khilji period. The Tajik in Asaf Khan was stirred, and he decided to keep this vast hoard of riches for himself. Some token gifts were sent to Agra in the hope that the known poverty of the region would not make the Emperor suspect his honesty. Akbar was, however, quick to perceive the duplicity of his general. Asaf Khan rebelled, but it did not take the Emperor long to bring him to the path of obedience.

## Massacre at Chitor

Mughal princes matured early; they also started early on the path of physical decline. Following the conquests of Malwa and Gondwana, Akbar felt the strain of a life given over largely to search after sensuous pleasures. The problems of a gradually expanding empire, he feared, might outpace his comprehension if not tackled straightaway. In moments of depression—inevitable adjunct of high living—he turned inwards, and sought answers to questions that troubled his mind.

Akbar was intent upon consolidating an empire that was lost and regained by his father. Samarkand, Qandhar, Bokhara, Badakhshan, Farghana and even Kabul were to him of academic interest only. Except for brief spells in his childhood, he had not lived in these distant places. His roots were in Hindustan, and he naturally wanted to build here for himself and his successors a kingdom based on popular support. Agra was his home. Exploitation of people for the benefit of regions across the Khyber never entered his thoughts. His was a mission that required total identification with the people of the land. To that end he now bent his energies.

Akbar felt that ground under him was firm. Agra and Delhi were in his hand. So was Punjab. The rebellion of the Mirzas\* in

\*Mirzas Muhammad Sultan, Muhammad Zaman and Ulugh Beg were the descendants of Mirza Hussain Baiqare of Khorasan. Babar brought them with him to Hindustan. Muhammad Zaman revolted against Humayun but was forgiven. He was killed in the battle of Chausa. The rebellion against Akbar was fomented by their descendants.

the east had been crushed. Afghans rocked the boat in Malwa and adjoining principalities for a while, but they too were dealt with sternly and forced to abandon aspirations for an independent state. His step-brother, Muhammad Hakim's march from Kabul to Lahore turned out to be a damp squib. He fled as soon as the news came that Akbar himself was on the move to meet his challenge. These successes, though minor, gave Akbar confidence in his arms and ability. Hereafter his annexations did not originate in his irrepressible libido; rather, they were the carefully calculated moves of a sovereign who believed that good government was a corollary to good results on the battlefield. War, to Akbar, was not only a means to the acquisition of new territories, but an end in itself. Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte also gave the conflict a similar status. Perpetual peace to them, as to Akbar, was the life of the grave—a state of passivity repugnant to the concept of growth and development.

Chitor was a thorn in the flesh for Akbar. Not only did the Rana not acknowledge him as overlord; he spurned all those Rajput royal houses which had made common cause with the Mughals, and given their daughters in marriage to the Emperor. Not bigger in size than the present day Punjab, Mewar was a bastion of Rajput pride and independence; it symbolized a fierce nationalism that brooked no accommodation with an alien power. The defeat of Rana Sangram Singh at the hands of Babar in the battle of Kanwaha was a scar too deep to be healed by Akbar's diplomatic approaches. Conscious of its long, unbroken heritage of freedom, Mewar was determined, come what may, to defend its borders, and preserve its sovereignty and self-respect. Stories of the exploits of its founder, Bapa Rawal,\* inspired the people of Mewar to stake their all in combating the challenge of Akbar's rising power. They remembered with heavy hearts the letdown by Humayun when the armies of Bahadur Shah of Gujarat were poised for the capture of Chitor. Disregard by him of the pledge implicit in the acceptance of a gold *rakshabandhan* sent by Rani Kumarwati rankled in their hearts, and they vowed not to have any

\*A shepherd; Bapa Rawal came to the throne of Mewar in 713 A.D. Folklore, however, places the date of his ascension at 135 A.D. Bapa fathered 225 children. The progeny of Bapa's children ruled Mewar till the State acceded to India in 1950.

truck with the Mughals in future. Following the sack of Chitor by Bahadur Shah, the Rani, along with one thousand three hundred other ladies, perished in the biggest ever collective performance of *jauhar*, and thus gave a new dimension to Mewar's distrust and hatred of the Timurid dynasty. The hills, rocks, desert and jungles of the region gave it protection against any frontal attack, and its rulers made use of this geographical circumstance to evolve a plan of guerilla warfare against would-be invaders. The undulating complex of the Aravalli hills (3000-4500 ft high) and the turbulence of the river Chambal and its tributaries gave the territory comparative protection against heavy artillery the Mughals depended upon.

Chitor, inset in a valley about eighty square miles in extent, was inaccessible from the west; three passes in the east were guarded by contingents of brave Rajputs assisted by armies of Bhils and other tribes whose skill in the use of the bow and arrow was a despair of the invader. Above all, the fort was almost impregnable; in its long history it had been captured only twice—first by Ala-ud-Din Khilji in 1303, and then by Bahadur Shah in 1535.

Although aware of these facts of history and geography, Akbar decided to launch a flash campaign to subjugate Mewar. Perhaps Rajas Bhagwan Das and Man Singh had a say in this decision. They knew that the ruler of Mewar, Uday Singh, was a gutless libertine who rated self above the state. He was born to Rani Kumarwati after the death of her husband, Rana Sangram Singh, and had been brought up surreptitiously by a selfless nurse who, in the euphoria of nationalism, sacrificed her own son so that "the line of Bapa Rawal might remain intact."\* Colonel Tod calls Uday Singh a craven, and adds:

The destinies of the Sisodias at this critical period of Mewar's history were in the hands of a coward, a man who had not one quality of a sovereign and woefully lacked martial virtue—the common heritage of his race. Yet he might have slumbered life

\*Following the death of Rana Sangram Singh, a royal bastard, Ranbir Singh, ascended the throne of Mewar with the help of a faction of Rajput chiefs. He was, however, dethroned, and Uday Singh became Rana in 1541.

away in inglorious repose during the lifetime of Humayun, or the contentions of the Pathan usurpers who came after. But, unfortunately for Rajasthan, a prince was then rearing who forged fetters for the Hindu race, which enthralled it for ages. Time has broken them as under, but their indelible marks remain, not like the galley slave's, physical and exterior, but deep mental scars never to be effaced.

The absence of the kingly virtues in the sovereign of Mewar filled to brim the bitter cup of her destiny. The guardian goddess of the Sisodias had promised never to abandon the rock of her pride while a descendant of Bapa Rawal devoted himself to her service. In the first assault by Alla,\* twelve crowned heads had defended the 'crimson banner'. In the second, the crown of martyrdom was won by the brave chieftain of Deola. But, in this the third and greatest struggle, no regal victim was forthcoming, and the mysterious tie which united the reigning deity at Eklinga to the throne of Chitor was severed for ever.

Though Mewar surged with nationalism, its effete monarch fled to the safety of a secluded villa in the interior on hearing that Akbar was advancing towards Chitor. Initial sorties by the Mughals were repulsed because of the death-defying heroism of the Rana's concubine queen who, according to Farishta, headed sorties into the heart of the Mughal camp and, on one occasion, to the Emperor's headquarters. Absence of a kingly coordinator, soon led to discord among the chieftains, some of whom conspired and killed the fearless heroine. Confusion reigned till Jai Mal, a Rajput soldier of rare courage and organizing ability, took control, and strengthened the defences. In vain did Akbar ram the ram-parts to take the fort by storm. Chitor stood dauntless and firm against frenzied attacks by Akbar's generals. The Emperor despaired, but did not give up. He pressed into service a team of sappers and miners in an attempt to blow up the fort's defences, but the withering Rajput fire made their assignment extremely hazardous. In an accidental explosion, nearly three hundred besiegers lost their lives.

At the advice of Raja Todar Mal, Akbar then decided to do the seemingly impossible task of building *sabats* (covered ways) right up to the ramparts. This was a time-consuming project, and also involved unpredictable risks. If victory was to be achieved,

Akbar realized, there was no alternative to constructing these approaches expeditiously. The loss of life was heavy, but that was no deterrent to the Emperor. His mind was made up. The cost in men and money was of no consideration to him. It took nearly two months to build *sabats* through which could press forward twelve soldiers abreast and also an elephant complete with *howdah*, a royal flag and other war gear. Akbar was pleased, and richly rewarded the corps of engineers incharge of the operation. However, Fate gave him a gift that decided the outcome before the *sabats* could be fully exploited: a chance shot hit Jai Mal, who was personally supervising repairs to a part of the front wall.

Abul Fazl and some other historians ascribe the shot which ultimately proved fatal to Akbar's musket Sangram. This may or may not be true. It was some time before the import of the accidental shot was fully realized. Within an hour, huge flames of fire were seen coming from residential palaces inside the fort. Akbar was intrigued. Raja Bhagwan Das guessed: "Perhaps these fires are laden with the souls of self-sacrificing Rajput princesses. I feel that *jauhar* has been performed. We seem to have won the day." He was right.

The fall of Jai Mal dispirited the defenders. True to Rajput traditions, they "consigned the ladies to the care of the sacred fire, put on saffron clothes, opened the gates, and rushed out to win immortality on the field of battle." The badly wounded, but still alive, Jai Mal was supported on a horse to lead the charge. Here was an act of unsurpassed daring that dazzled Akbar. Waves after waves of Rajputs came to be slaughtered at the hands of their conquerors. No one escaped death. The assault was made memorable by the manner in which the sixteen-year-old Fateh Singh (Fatta) who succeeded Jai Mal as commander of the besieged forces, his mother, and young wife courted death fighting. Fatta himself was trampled under the foot of an advancing elephant. His body lay unidentified for hours before it was picked up, and sent to Akbar as a trophy of war.

Akbar entered the citadel in a mood of ruthlessness. The stubborn resistance put up by the garrison and the people of Chitor brought out the Timur in him. He unsheathed his sword, and ordered a general massacre till such time as he chose to hold it in his hand. The slaughter that went on for the next nine and a half



hours was an exhibition of brutality one does not normally associate with the reign of Akbar. Innocent men and women were dragged out of their houses, and put to the sword, lance or hatchet to the accompaniment of shouts in praise of Allah. Young girls were raped in public, and then cut to pieces in half contempt, half mockery for their much-flaunted norms of chastity. Children, even babes in arms, were not spared. Many a fire was set up to roast them alive in the name of vengeance. Abul Fazl estimates that over forty thousand Rajputs and Rajputnis "wallowed in the dust in repentance of their crimes against the imperial army." The count was taken by weighing the sacred threads taken off from around their dead bodies. Seven and a half bundles, each weighing eighty pounds, were carried to Agra to prove that the Rajput hegemony over Mewar had finally been broken.

The victorious army indulged its lust for loot for as long as there was anything left in the city to be carried away. Akbar deputed his trusty officials, chief among them being the trio of Hindu Rajas Bhagwan Das, Man Singh and Todar Mal, to seal the vast treasures found in the fort, and to make arrangements for their transport to Agra. The precious cargo also included seven women of high Rajput descent—the lucky (or unlucky) remnants of the female population of the royal palaces; the rest had preferred death to capture by the enemy.

The sack of Chitor will for ever remain an enigma. Normally, like most conquerors, Akbar was generous in victory, but here the urge to wreak vengeance possessed him. He roared like a madman. As reports of blood-letting reached him, he brandished his diamond-studded sword in exultation, and urged his generals to see that no trace was left of the tribe that chose to defy him for so long. He even wanted the birds of Chitor to be decimated for the sin of having "breathed the same air as gave life to the defenders of the citadel." Nobody mustered the courage to put in a word even remotely suggestive of the virtue of mercy. They all, including the Amber princes, stood aghast, not knowing how best to request him to call a halt to the butchery. Todar Mal once ventured to deploy his fund of skilful phrases to soften him, but in vain:

I am in no mood to listen to the sound of good words. My ears are at present attuned only to enjoy the clang of sword. Leave

me alone. I am in communion with the Amir.\* Send me a good reciter. Let him read to me in loud voice chapters seven to twelve of *Shahnama*. The store of kingly wisdom that adorns those pages cannot be surpassed for its depth and beauty. Blood, not nectar, holds the key to the success of a sovereign. Give me war. Peace is of no avail to me.

Having said this, Akbar fell into a trance, opening his eyes only rarely to inquire about reports from the city. It seemed as if a sea of turmoil ebbed and rose within him as the crescendo of mass wailings from across the ramparts reached his ears. Occasionally, a flash of anger or a cynical smile came across the contours of his handsome face, and he would again quickly retreat to the inner recesses of his being—perhaps to consult with his ancestor whether it was time to slip his sword into the ornamental case hanging listlessly by the side of his waist. For nine long hours Akbar kept everybody guessing and waiting. The answer came only when Mira\*\* appeared on the scene. According to a Rajput historian, it was she who asked the Emperor to put his sword in the scabbard. "I do not like the look of it. Why need you carry a deadly weapon in your hand when there is no enemy around? We Rajputs unsheathe our swords only on the battlefield." Akbar smiled and obeyed "the command." He induced himself to believe that God had sent her to intercede on behalf of her compatriots. For years, Mira enjoyed favour in the Emperor's harem. Her artlessness thawed Akbar, and he gave the cease-killing signal.

One wonders if Chitor would have been spared the ordeal had Rana Uday Singh given his consent to a fair Mewar princess entering Akbar's harem. Frustrations of the flesh, according to diagnosticians of the mind, often lead to a lamentable leanness of the soul. Akbar was, above all, a he-man, a Tarzan who uprooted with impunity homes and hamlets in case they happened to come in the way of his primeval urges.

Chitor fell in January 1568. To say thanks to Allah, Akbar decided to return to Agra via Ajmer Sharif. His intention was to do the 122-mile journey on foot. Indian sentiment was averse to

\*Amir Timur.

\*\* The 14-year-old Mira, a girl of exquisite beauty, was found hiding under a heap of discarded carpets when Akbar entered the fort.

the devout riding a horse, camel or a palanquin when proceeding on pilgrimage. When the keepers of the shrine of Khwaja Mueen-ud-Din at the holy city came to know about the Emperor's resolve, they hit on a plan to save Akbar and his family members the inconvenience of a long walk in intense heat and through sand-storms that often blew in Rajasthan at frightening speeds: the head priest sent a message to Akbar that he (the priest) had been commanded by the Khwaja in a dream that the Emperor should be dissuaded from doing the journey on foot. The pledge would be taken as fulfilled, the message added, if the royal party rode horses or were carried in palanquins.

The messenger made his submission to Akbar at the second stage from Chitor. Already the party, which included many ladies of the harem, were feeling the strain of a strenuous walk, and were well inclined to be persuaded to give up the self-imposed ordeal. Without examining the motive of the directive, the Emperor ordered the horses and litters to be made ready for the next lap. A more pleasant word could not have come from any quarter. However, to satisfy his conscience, Akbar did the last five miles on foot. Every member of the entourage, including the ladies, followed suit. The people of Ajmer gave him an affectionate welcome. Akbar responded with a burst of generosity such as had rarely been seen in the holy city. Every adult male and female was given a cash gift; for ten days, the city feasted on food prepared in the royal kitchen. Offerings of gold, silver and precious stones were made at the shrine in such abundance that the keepers requested for special arrangements for their safe-keeping. Robes of honour were given to the Imams, and large sums of money were placed at their disposal for the maintenance of the mausoleum. According to Abul Fazl, when the Emperor started on the journey to Agra after a ten-day stay in the city, the population shed tears and saluted him for his devotion and munificence.

The first five miles out of Ajmer were also performed on foot—a gesture of reverence that brought shouts of Allah-Hu-Akbar to the lips of thousands lining the route of the procession.

According to Farishta, "the sin of the slaughter of Chitor" no longer weighed on Akbar's mind. "He washed it all with the water of penitence at Ajmer." If anything, he was elated at his success, and often entered into discussion with the *ulema* on the ethics of war. He was a far cry from Emperor Asoka. There were no Kalingas

in his scheme of kingship. He would repeat a hundred Chitors if the demands of sovereignty demanded that course.

Farishta is right when he suggests that Akbar was convinced that the victory at Chitor was a dispensation of God. The Rajput defeat, according to him, was a just punishment for their arrogance and lack of accommodation. Akbar thanked the saint of Ajmer more for averting a wrong than for helping the right to prevail. Like Babar, he was endowed with a sense of mission, a compulsive belief that he was an agent of Allah, a Messiah who could do no wrong. This was the conviction which later led him to institute *Din-i-illahi* and enact such liberal measures as were, in his opinion, corollaries to his divine mission. That these measures were considered un-Islamic by the orthodox was, to him, a piece of unwarranted bigotry.

Not being able to bring along with him a blue-blooded Mewar princess, Akbar made content with transporting to Agra the gates of the conquered citadel—mementos of the fierce fighting which took place before the Rajput surrender. These magnificent portals were placed at the entrance of Fatehpur Sikri, the dream city Akbar ordered to be built in commemoration of his victory in Gujarat. Buland-Darwaza is a structure of considerable historical significance. It reminds one, among other things, of thousands of brave Rajputs who once perished trying to preserve its inviolability.

For reasons not difficult to pinpoint, Akbar regarded Chitor as a landmark in his life, a starting-point for the greatness he achieved by the dint of his arms. In comparison, his previous successes at Kalpi, Chanderi and in Malwa were events too minor to arouse much enthusiasm. Akbar's hate-love relationship with the two dead heroes of Chitor—Jai Mal and Fateh Singh—found expression in the installation of their statues on either side of the gate of the old fort at Agra.\* Later these statues, complete with the black marble elephants on which they were mounted, were placed in similar positions in front of the fort at Delhi.\*\* How and when

\*The old fort at Agra built by Sultan Salim Shah.

\*\*The Delhi fort was started to be built by Shahjahan in 1638. The famous traveller Bernier was much impressed by the artistic magnificence of the statues of Jai Mal and Fattah. When the Marhattas conquered Delhi in 1731, they took away the statues. Following the first war of liberation in 1857, the elephants were found buried twelve feet underground outside Delhi. The statues, however, could not be traced.

these "grim reminders of Chitor" were shifted to Delhi is not known. However, Aurangzeb had no use for the images of "Hindu heretics," and he had them removed from the gate. The statues of two other Chitor heroes—Amar Singh and Karan Rai—which were ordered to be built by Jahangir were also discarded by Aurangzeb.

Whether Akbar wanted to honour or desecrate the memory of Jai Mal and Fateh is debatable. In the opinion of this writer, to place these statues in the position of *durbans* (gatekeepers) was not only a studied move to make them the targets of public ridicule; it was also a calculated affront to the susceptibilities of the Suryavans Rajputs. Some western historians, among them Vincent Smith, who depict the statues as symbols of Akbar's admiration for the Rajput brand of gallantry, do not seem to realize the import of the position given them. In the Orient, a *durban* is considered the lowliest of the lowly domestic servants. Had he meant otherwise, Akbar could have found for the statues a place of honour in some garden or public place.

A suspicion is natural that the house of Jaipur, represented in Agra by no other than Mariam Zamani\* and her relatives Bhagwan Das and Man Singh, influenced Akbar to rub salt on Mewar's wounds by installing the statues where he did. Enmity between the two dynasties was old and deep. The daughter of Raja Bihari Mal was now in a position to wreak vengeance. Her star was in the ascendent. A year after Chitor, she gave birth to Salim—future Emperor Jahangir—and became *Malika-i-Muezzamma* with all the powers and influence enjoyed by the mother of the *Wali-Ahad* (heir-apparent). The death in infancy of her twin sons—named Hassan and Hussain—four years earlier was an event that cast gloom in the house of Amber. The birth of Salim at Sikri, with the avowed blessing of Shaikh Salim Chishti, gave Jodha Bai and her train-carriers a high status. They assumed the role of an inner caucus, and the Emperor freely sought their advice on all matters. Jai Mal was at one time their bitterest enemy. The haughty Mewar general had insulted Raja Bihari Mal following Jodha Bai's marriage with Akbar. Now was the time to avenge that rebuke. Apparently, it

\*Jodha Bai was given the high honour of being named Mariam Zamani (Mary of the World). Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum, was known as Mariam Makani (dwelling with Mary).

satisfied their ego to have the statues installed at the front gate. A more degrading site could not have been chosen.

Raja Bhagwan Das was given by Akbar the high title of Amir-ul-Ulema, and Raja Man Singh achieved the distinction of being appointed a Mansabdar of the rank of seven thousand—a status enjoyed in Akbar's reign only by his sons Daniyal and Salim and two Muslim generals. Even Raja Bihari Mal, father of Jodha Bai, was denied that eminent rank; he did not cross the five thousand mark. However, it may be of interest that of the four hundred and sixteen Mansabdars of Akbar, only forty seven were Rajputs, and the aggregate of their quotas amounted to fifty-three thousand horses. Of these, seventeen held Mansabs of from two thousand to five thousand and thirty from one hundred to two thousand. The princes of Amber, Marwar, Bikaner, Bundi, Jaisalmer and Bundelkhand held Mansabs of above one thousand, but Amber alone held the dignity of five thousand. In 1569, Akber married the daughter of the Rana of Bikaner, but she was not able to achieve the popularity and position enjoyed by Jodha Bai.

Rana Uday Singh died four years after the sack of Chitor. He was then 42, an age at which Rajput princes were generally at the prime of their physical strength. But not so the effete Rana, who packed into his adult years such abundance of sensual self-indulgence as was bound to impair his health. A few sycophants were by his side when he breathed his last. None of his twenty-five sons accompanied him when he fled Chitor on hearing the news about Akbar's advance. The four years he spent in exile, moving from one inaccessible place to another in the inner recesses of the Aravalli hills, were for him a period of unending torment. He had neither a crown to wear, nor a home to live in. His wives and mistresses deserted him one by one. He yearned to meet his sons and daughters, and often invoked the titular deity of Eklinga for help to be united with members of his family. Fear of being captured by the Mughals haunted him. Never did he stay in one place for more than a couple of weeks. The party was so hard pressed that it had to go without food occasionally. Half a dozen loyal noblemen sustained his morale by telling him stories about the hardships undergone by his ancestors in wars to safeguard Mewar's independence. Towards the end, despair bred in him a degree of courage, and he sometimes talked, in the style of a patriot, about the values dear to the house of Bapa Rawal. He took pride in the thought that

the blood of Nausherwan, the Just, ran in his veins, and raved about the injustices and atrocities committed by the Mughals. Babar was, to him, a demon devoid of all kingly virtues. Not unoften did he lament over his father Rana Sanga's defeat at Kanwaha. Treachery, he believed, proved to be the decisive factor in that battle. Likewise, he criticized Akbar, and occasionally described him as a Satan in the garb of man. The nine-hour rule of the sword in Chitor was, according to him, a reflection of the Emperor's bigotry and ruthlessness.

When the Rana lay dying in a hut bereft of all worldly comforts, he rose to what may be called his finest hour. He spoke in a low voice about the traditions and glory of Mewar, and asked his companions again and again to leave nothing undone to safeguard the integrity of the kingdom. "The responsibility on your shoulders is heavy. But I have no doubt that as the sons of Mewar you will discharge it with courage and faith. Farewell! The great Lord will help you to brave with resolution the perils that lie ahead. Jai Eklinga!"

The end came shortly afterwards. The body was consigned to the fire just as the sun slid down the nearby hills. As night descended, the gloom in the camp deepened. The nobles realized that a super-human effort would be required to be made if Mewar was to shake off the Mughal yoke. The 27-year rule of Uday Singh had been a sad story of poor deeds and poorer leadership.

The Governor of Chitor, Asaf Khan, relayed to Agra the news of Uday Singh's death. Akbar expressed regret at not having been able to capture him. In the Rana's death, he read the failure of a mission, an abject surrender to the hills and jungles in which the deceased played hide and seek with the imperial forces for four long years. Akbar realized for the first time the difficulty of subjugating Mewar completely. Little did he know at this time that in Uday Singh's eldest son, Rana Pratap, he was to find an enemy strong in will-power, strong in purpose, and still stronger in patriotism. Pratap in due course deflated the Mughal claim of invincibility, and won for himself a place of everlasting honour in Rajput history. Had Uday Singh's dying wish to pass the throne to his second son Jag Mal been honoured by the chiefs, the history of Mewar, as that of the whole of Rajasthan, would undoubtedly have taken a different course.

Jag Mal's mother was the most favoured of Uday Singh's twenty-

five wives, and this the Assembly of chiefs decided was no cogent reason for denying to Pratap the throne which was his by the right of inheritance. The 32-year old Pratap ascended the throne on 22 February 1572, and Jag Mal left Mewar in a huff to seek Akbar's support. The latter received him with honour in the belief that the defector would come handy in the realization of his ambition to vassalize Mewar. This turned out to be a vain hope. Jag Mal died fighting on the side of Mughals in the battle of Dattani in 1583.

The sack of Chitor enkindled in Maharana Pratap and his followers a fire of patriotism the Mughals found difficult to contain.



## Ranthambor

Akbar reached Agra on 13 April 1568. Outwardly, he was happy, but inwardly the thought that Rana Uday Singh evaded capture gnawed his mind. Chitor had no doubt been subdued, but Mewar was still far from conquered. Stories of defiance of Mughal authority by Rathors and other Rajput clans owing allegiance to Mewar circulated widely not only in Rajasthan but throughout northern India.

One day, Akbar asked Raja Bhagwan Das in the open court whether it was true that every adult, male and female, in Mewar had taken a vow at the shrine of Eklinga to sleep on the ground till such time as the Mughals were ousted from Chitor. The Raja replied:

Padshah-i-Alam, this is not all. They have also taken a pledge to eat only one simple meal a day till Uday Singh or one of his twenty-five sons comes to occupy the throne. They are a tightly-strung people, totally oblivious of the needs of the body. They live for the future—the future not of their own times, but of the times of their grandsons and great-great-grandsons. The past—traditions, values, victories, defeats, and all the rest—moulds their outlook and character. They care neither for life nor riches nor worldly fame. What they live and fight for is individual and collective honour. They trace their origin to the sun and the moon. The blood of Lord Rama,\* they believe, runs

\*The Sisodias claim their descent from Luv, the elder son of Lord

in their veins. No sacrifice to them is too great for the preservation of what they consider their heritage. Neither swords and lances nor elephants and horses can tame their spirits. Offers of friendship may.

Loyalty to the Emperor forbids me to enter the corridors of flattery and untruth. In the view of this humble servant, it would be best to leave Chitor alone for some time. The Khan\* may be advised to use the weapon of love to conquer Mewar. This may take a longer time, but there seems to be no other way. I seek Your Majesty's forgiveness for having spoken out in this vein. A courtier is not worth a dime if he does not share with the sovereign his thoughts without reservation. May God preserve Your Most Holy Highness to rule over us till eternity.

Akbar listened to the Raja with deference. He knew the Rajput prince was telling the truth. But his ambition stood against accepting the Raja's conclusion. He was above all a man of action—one who sought self-realisation in the hazards of dangerous living. War, to him, was everything, peace nothing. Akbar acknowledged the wisdom and sincerity of the Raja's words, and said:

One part of my being acknowledges with gratitude the sanity of your views; the other rejects them as pusillanimity. We conquered Chitor at great personal risk and at the cost of thousands of our faithful and distinguished followers. The enemy lost nearly half a lakh dead and wounded. The great Allah willed it that way. Our victory was a signal from God that we should go ahead with our plans of conquest. This is the Timurid way of looking at one's successes and failures. Had the Designer of Fortunes disapproved of my scheme of operations, I could not have returned from Chitor with hardly a scar on my body. My faith in Him is complete. Thirteen years ago, the hidden powers gave us a great victory at Panipat. Ever since I have been imbued with the sense of a mission, the awareness of a purpose bigger than mere conquests. We are all instruments in

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Rama. Some historians believe that Lahore is derived from Luv, and that this city was the ancient capital of the Surajvanshi Rajputs.

\* The Khan refers to Asaf Khan who had been appointed Governor of Chitor.

His hands. I submit gladly to His will. The criteria of the right and wrong are rooted in one's conscience which, it seems, is the seat of the omniscient Allah.

Raja Bhagwan Das, the people of Mewar may be proud of their heritage and traditions of valour. But our heritage is no less compelling. We would be failing in our allegiance to the great Amir\* if we at this stage relinquish the plan to bring the Rana to his knees. We know we can depend upon your support in the execution of our schemes of expanding the borders of our territories.

This was perhaps the first time that Akbar enunciated his theory of kingship and also his criteria of the right and wrong in State affairs. Though unable to read and write, he was an assiduous listener of the works of religion and philosophy. A photographic memory was his most potent weapon in debate. Saa'di, Hafiz and Maulana Rum inspired him to accept God as the final arbiter, the Dispenser of Justice and wisdom, one who presided over the destinies of the humankind. Off the cuff quotations from their works often left the *ulema* aghast at the depth of the Emperor's knowledge. Time and again Abul Fazl refers to the "Khedive of the World" mystifying his listeners with masterly expositions on abstruse metaphysical questions, and then inviting others to express their views. Tolerance was a virtue rare in eastern potentates. Akbar was an exception. At 26, he gave clear evidence of being a straight-sighted intellectual, open-minded and shorn completely of the usual kingly can-do-no-wrong complex. This liberalism was the basis of his future greatness.

A minor revolt\*\* engineered by the younger Mirzas in the east led Akbar to delay his plans for the subjugation of pockets of Rajput resistance in the south. Also, the Emperor wanted to neutralise the growing power of his foster-family in Punjab before setting out on a military expedition which might have meant his absence from the capital for an unspecified period.

Following the murder of Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Khan in

\*Amir Timur.

\*\*This revolt was led by Ibrahim Hussain Mirza and Muhammad Hussain Mirza, sons of Muhammad Sultan Mirza. Ulugh Beg Mirza had died in 1567, i.e., before the start of the expedition to conquer Chitor.

May 1562, the family members of the Ataka had been granted important and lucrative fiefs in Punjab, and they were all known to have grown considerably in wealth and influence. Keeping in view the Timurid principle of not letting any one clan or family to get entrenched in one place, Akbar decided on mass transfers, the object being to weaken the strong and make the weak look up to the Emperor for support. The entire *Ataka-khail*\* were given comparatively unimportant and less remunerative Jagirs in the eastern provinces—a change which some feared might spark off a revolt. These apprehensions proved to be rooted in discontent among some self-seeking members of the official hierarchy. Akbar's military organization had by now developed into an impressive war machinery, and the feudal chieftains dared not raise the standard of revolt for fear of quick, decisive counteraction by the imperial army.

Mirza Aziz Koka, who later rose to the rank of Khan-i-Azam, was, however, allowed to retain the fief of Dipalpur. Akbar had a soft corner in his heart for this son of the Ataka. Not only was his loyalty beyond question; he had endeared himself to the Emperor by his knowledge of the socio-religious modes of various Indian communities. In addition, he was a soldier endowed with abundance of courage, and Akbar was keen to retain him in an area vulnerable to external aggression. In the strategically important Lahore was installed Hussain Quli Khan, another royal favourite who shared Akbar's views on the equality of all religions. Shortly afterwards, this officer was given the title of Khan-i-Jahan.

Some other changes were also made both at Agra and other places, the most important being the appointment of Shahab-ud-Din Ahmad Khan as Minister incharge of the Treasury. This was a key portfolio, including as it did the responsibility of fixing Jagirs and other land rewards to various categories of the *ulema* and noblemen. Corruption in those days was rife in high places, and Akbar came to realize early that unless this evil was checked it would be impossible to provide a sound basis for administration. Shahab-ud-Din Khan had made a name for his honesty and skill in the management of State revenues. Akbar hand-picked him for the post, disregarding objections raised in certain quarters on grounds of seniority.

\*Ataka-Khail literally means the Ataka bridge.

The Khan-i-Khanan Munim Khan, Prime Minister, was honoured with additional fiefs in the east. Ripe in years and experience, he was the Emperor's most trusted counsellor. The equation between the two was of mutual respect: Munim admired the great human virtues the Shahinshah was endowed with, and the latter acknowledged the single-minded loyalty with which the Khan had served him, his father and grandfather.

Having thus fortified the centre and the wings of his domain against possible uprisings, Akbar started once again on his hunt for the heads of recalcitrant Rajputs. The legendary invincibility of the fort of Ranthambor was, to him, a challenge that could not be left unmet. The citadel, perched on a rock steep and inaccessible from any side, was held by Raja Surjan Rai, Hara Rajput of the state of Bundi—a soldier known far and wide for his tenacity and qualities of leadership. According to a legend still current in Rajasthan, his niece, Rajkumari Jaiwanti, twenty-two, was a Mewar princess pledged “not to bear a child in thralldom” and not to adorn herself with even an ear-ring till the Mughals were ousted from Rajasthan. She wore men's dress, rode horses with the skill of a born soldier, and often went out with the Rana on big game hunting expeditions. A marksman of note, she was reputed never to have shot her arrow in vain at a fleeing animal or a bird in the air. Her courage, according to a popular song, was reflected in “the beauty of her face and the shapeliness of her bodily form.” The song goes on:

The rays of brilliant light shooting out of the sockets of her eyes bewitch, entrance and kill. Her whole being is engulfed in an aura that dazzles and captivates. When she smiles, the beasts of the jungle become docile pets, ready to lap the dust of her feet. In anger, the shafts of her wrath are like the *agnibans* of Lord Rama. Jai Jaiwanti! She is our pride, our finest asset. For a million years, the like of her has not walked the sacred soil of our motherland. She is great. She is the uncrowned queen of Ranthambor. At her word, millions are prepared to die. Neither Afghans, nor Persians nor Turks can make a dent on her courage. Akbar Padshah may have large armies at his beck and call. He may also have at his command the services of Jaipurias\* who seem happy and proud to wear the golden

\*The reference is obviously to Rajas Bhagwan Das and Man Singh.

chains. He may have elephants equal in strength to the famed Rustam. But he has no Jaiwanti, no Surjan Rai. Heed, Padshah Akbar, if thou comest here, you and your armies will be scorched in the intense heat of our patriotism. You take pride in life, we in death. You seek glory in riches, we in poverty. You dress in silks and satins, we in saffron of the dauntless devotees of duty to our motherland. Pillage and plunder are your creed. We sustain ourselves on courage and love. You are a scion of the house of Babar. The blood of Bapa Rawal runs in our veins. Your defeat at our hands is certain. God forbid, with honour gone, you will be a mere beggar in the street of infamy. Watch your steps. Ranthambor is impregnable.

Truely, Ranthambor was impregnable. Badouni wrote that "even an ant's feet would slip while climbing the walls of this citadel." One hundred and fifteen miles south-east from Ajmer, the fort stands on a hill, almost inaccessible from any side. Located in the thick of jungles atop lofty peaks, the fort, according to Abul Fazl, was virtually impregnable: "In comparison, all other castles look naked. The fort is very lofty and strong so much so that the lasso of imagination cannot reach its battlements, nor the catapult of fancy be effectual against its high walls."

Other historians, both Muslim and Rajput, have also commented on the strength of this fort. Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji, with all his paraphernalia of total warfare, took a whole year to pulverize its defence. In comparison, Chitor fell to him in six months and seven days.

Emboldened by his victory at Chitor, Akbar envisioned himself as a Muslim Vikramaditya against whose military prowess no native ruler could stand for long. His courtiers, Munim Khan downwards, encouraged him in this conviction. A majority of them looked for opportunities for advancement and to make riches. The mark-time of peace was, to them, a cover for faintness of the heart, and a subterfuge for the pseudo-intellectuals to indulge their passion for passivity. Thus encouraged, Akbar attained an extraordinary level of self-confidence. Several years later, Akbar spoke thus to the Jesuit Missionary Aquaviva:

Kings cannot be saints, nor saints kings. Each has its own place in the scheme of life. It is best that they continue to perform

their assigned duties. Maybe at some future date, the saint-king concept of the ancient Hindus may come to be realised. It is a distant dream, an ideal that must for ever, like a mirage, continue to allure the credulous. I am not a star-gazer; neither am I a searcher after things that do not appear to exist. Each man has a mission to perform. Mine is to unite this great land. The sword has a definite role to play in this assignment. Even God has sanctioned the use of force. . . .

This enunciation lays bare Akbar's theory of kingship and the norms of conduct he set store by. He was, first and foremost, a conqueror resolved to bring the whole of Hindustan under his sway. Everything else, including his liberalism and its many corollaries, was only a means to achieve this end.

The cautious warnings of Raja Bhagwan Das were ignored by Akbar, not with an angry wave of his imperious hand, but with extreme civility and discretion. His equation with the Amber Raja and his nephew Man Singh was conditioned in no small measure by his tenderness, tantamounting almost to love, for Jodha Bai.

The stories about Jaiwanti's masculine courage intrigued Akbar. Nine queens and five princesses eluded his grasp at Chitor: they were among the nearly four hundred proud ladies who walked solemnly to their deaths in a mass *Jauhar* following the fatal bullet wound received by Jai Mal. He made up his mind not to let this jewel of Mewar slip through his fingers. His secret instructions made no beating about the bush: every effort was to be made to capture alive this legendary personality. Force was to be applied only if persuasion proved ineffective. The suave, soft-spoken Bhagwan Das was to be the spearhead of a diplomatic offensive to prevail upon the Rana to surrender Ranthambor without bloodshed. As at Chitor, the conduct of mining operations was entrusted to Qasim Khan Mir and Raja Todar Mal. Akbar himself assumed the overall command of the expedition.

A massive Mughal force, estimated at nearly fifty thousand men, in addition to artillery, cavalry and elephant corps, marched out of Agra on 21 December 1568. The first major halt was at Delhi where the Emperor, besides offering prayers at the shrine of Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, went on foot to the tomb of his father in search of blessings for the success of his mission. He knew the task ahead was difficult and, in the true Babarian tradi-

tion, he set about mustering on his side the support of his dead ancestors, dead religious preceptors and the almost dead concept of divine partiality for the house of Timur.

At the *Dargah*, Akbar one day sat cross-legged from morning till mid-day prayers listening to hymns in praise of the Prophet and his disciples. He spoke not a word. At one stage, the custodian noticing a swell of tears in the Padshah's eyes, promptly took the rostrum to bring the proceedings to a lower pitch of emotional fervour. It took the Emperor some time to come down to the earth, and take note of what was happening around him. When in meditation, Akbar was a picture of humility, trying as if to hide himself from the gaze of the people around. The characteristic tilt of his bent head to the left was a sign that he was in the upper regions of the spirit, and when in that posture, few could take the courage to awaken him from his trance. Once when he was only fifteen, he escaped unnoticed from his palace to meditate in a corner by the side of a *pipal* tree, and he retraced his steps only when the shadows lengthened and the sun was about to slip down to its resting place below the distant horizon. He meditated only occasionally but whenever he did, it meant an escape from the transitory to the permanent, a state of uplift from the din and dust of the world around to the rarefied regions of the spirit.

The trance at the *Dargah* has been commented upon by many chroniclers, but no one has done it more eloquently than an unknown minor keeper of the tomb:

Akbar came to the shrine dressed in white cotton clothes. It was mid-winter. To protect himself from the cold wind, he covered himself, in the style of peasants, with a thin white woollen shawl. At the entrance, he was met by the venerable Sajda-Nashin and some distinguished citizens of Delhi. The Emperor on this occasion wore no insignia of royalty. He came as a humble pilgrim, unattended by the usual retinue of officers and personal servants. He walked slowly and with extreme reverence to the shrine, stood there for a while in silence, and then raised his hands in prayer. Everybody followed suit. Engrossed in deep thought, Akbar went round the tomb several times, and then stood reverentially at its foot as if to recapitulate and rededicate himself to the seven cardinal virtues—love, generosity, courage, knowledge, freedom, honesty and piety—



the saint is associated with. There then came a mysterious glow on Akbar's face—a glow of complete submission to the Auliya and the values that immortalised him. Here was the Emperor of Hindustan acknowledging silently the suzerainty of the emperor of the spirit. The sight was ennobling. Riches for once looked pale and worthless before the sunshine of the Hazrat's spiritual attainments. Many a king and queen had paid their homage to the saint before, but none so soulfully as did Akbar on this occasion.

When led to a seat prepared specially for him on a raised platform, Akbar halted, pondered for a fraction of a moment, turned back, and sat on the ground next to a legless devotee chanting "Allah Akbar" in low, vibrating notes. Nobody dared question the Emperor's decision. The atmosphere was charged with extreme religious ardour. When the recitation of the holy Quran began, Akbar bent his head still lower, clasped his hands as if in awe at the grandeur of God and His manifestations, closed his eyes to meditate perhaps on the reality of life and death. Then the *hamd* and *naats* were sung, holy men of learning raised their voices to extol the virtues of the Auliya, the rich and the poor offered their *nazranas*, but the Padshah did not move from his dusty seat. His surrender seemed to be total.

The Emperor left soon after the noon prayers. His material offerings were kept a secret. It was, however, believed that many new lands were assigned for the upkeep of the Dargah. The keepers were richly rewarded. The Padshah pledged himself to revisit the shrine on his return from Ranthambor. His munificence was boundless. The poor praised him for the alms they received, and the rich did him honour for his piety and devotion. Akbar is truly a great monarch—generous, strong, God-fearing, self-confident, merciful, just and, above all courageous and full of humility.

This is a good summation of one aspect of Akbar's character. The other—callous, vengeful, unconforming, ruthless, inflexible and unforgiving—comes up occasionally in the chronicles written by his detractors. He was a strange mixture of the good and the bad, a compound that baffled analysis, and led each analyst to interpret him in accordance with his own predilections.

Travelling via Mewat and Alwar, Akbar reached the precincts of Ranthambor on 10 February 1569. The sight of the citadel impressed him: "It is beautiful" he exclaimed; its strength and location were the challenges that spurred him to feverish activity without losing a moment. The tactics he chose to follow were similar to those that gave him victory at Chitor. On the day following his arrival, he went out to survey the hill and its surroundings. Raja Todar Mal and Ali Qasim Khan were in attendance. He went up to the top of the hill, and studied carefully the plan of operations prepared in advance by the two generals. According to Abul Fazl, "he brought the figure of its conquest into the mirror of his imagination, and tightened the straps of resolution for its capture."

As at Chitor, Akbar ordered heavy cannons to be placed all around the hill. His intention was to blockade the fort so completely as to prevent "even the wind from entering it." To transport the batteries to points from where the ramparts could be brought under fire was no easy task. Each cannon was driven by two hundred pairs of oxen, and an equal quantum of ox-power had to be used to carry ammunition for every unit of artillery. The heavy guns were capable of firing stones and copper-balls weighing sixty and thirty *maunds* respectively. Todar Mal was assigned the task of constructing a *sabat* (covered way) right up to the foot of the castle, and to keep in readiness a team of sappers and miners to blow up the most vulnerable part of the fortifications at the first opportunity. These initial preparations for an assault were completed at breakneck speed, and when all looked set for the final thrust doubts began to assail Akbar. The garrison showed no sign of panic; it maintained virtually a non-stop bombardment of the Mughal positions. Casualties among the besiegers mounted at an alarming rate. On one day, the imperialists lost nearly five hundred dead, and nearly twice that number were wounded. Reports of Rajkumari Jaiwanti's heroic calls to the defenders for do-or-die resistance seemed to convince Akbar that it would take an inordinately long time to capture the fort. His guns were making no dent on its defences: the stone and copper missiles rebounded back like rubber balls after hitting the ramparts. Passive hostility of the population added to Akbar's discomfiture. The fort, it was common knowledge, was well-stocked with foodgrains; so much so that, according to a Rajput historian, "it could stand siege for

a hundred years." On the other hand, the Mughal supply lines were seriously threatened. Tribesmen, in particular the Bhils, and Rajput guerillas were actively engaged all along the route from Mewat in hit-and-run skirmishes against the invaders. Akbar took counsel with his generals, and decided to suspend force for a while and try to achieve his objective through negotiation. He remembered the advice given by Raja Bhagwan Das that it was easier to subdue Rajputs with love than with a show of military might. The experiment, he thought, was worth making. For its success, he put his faith in the traditional Rajput norms of chivalry and honour. How he went about to attain his goal is told best in the words of Colonel Tod:\*

Akbar had been some time before the impregnable walls of the castle without the hope of its surrender when Bhagwan Das of Amber and his son, the more celebrated Raja Man, who had not only rendered their allegiance to Akbar but allied themselves to him by marriage, offered to use their influence to make Surjan Rai faithless to the pledge 'to hold the castle as a fief of Chitor.' That courtesy which is never laid aside by belligerent Rajputs obtained Raja Man access to the castle, and the Emperor accompanied him in the guise of a mace-bearer. While conversing, an uncle of the Rao recognized Akbar and, with that sudden impulse which rises from respect, took the mace from his hand and placed the Emperor on the cushion of the governor of the castle. Akbar's presence of mind did not forsake him, and he said: 'Well, Rao Surjan, what is to be done?' This was replied to by Raja Man, 'give up Ranthambor, and become the servant of the King with high honours and office.'

The preferred bribe was indeed magnificent—the government of fifty-two districts, whose revenues were to be appropriated without inquiring, on furnishing the customary contingent, and liberty to name any other terms which would be solemnly guaranteed by the King.

A treaty was drawn up on the spot, which presents a good picture of Hindu feeling. The terms were:

1. that the chiefs of Bundi should be exempted from that

\*This quotation is taken from Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan*. His story was based on the chronicles of the state of Bundi.

custom, degrading to a Rajput, of sending a bride to the royal harem;

2. exemption from *jizya* or poll-tax;

3. that the chiefs of Bundi should not be compelled to cross the Attock;

4. that the vassals of Bundi should be exempted from the obligation of sending their wives or female relatives to hold a stall in the Mina Bazar;

5. that they should have the privilege of entering the Diwan-i-Khas completely armed;

6. that their sacred edifices should be respected;

7. that they should never be placed under the command of a Hindu leader;

8. that their horses should not be branded with the imperial *dagh*;

9. that they should be allowed to beat their *nakaras* in the streets of the capital as far as Lal Darwaza, and that they should not be expected to do the prostration on entering the presence of the Emperor;

10. that Bundi should be to the Haras what Delhi is to the King, who should guarantee them from any change of capital.

The news of the deal shocked Rajkumari Jaiwanti. She clutched at her hair in agony, discarded instantly the traditional ornaments and the insignia of royalty she was wearing, rubbed off the red vermillion mark on her forehead, threw aside her coat of mail, and rushed to her quarters to change into the dress of a temple dancer. A replica of the shrine of Eklinga was located in the northern corner of the castle. Thither she went chanting 'Har-Har-Mahadev' and humming songs traditionally associated with the last desperate effort to save one's honour. She entered the shrine as if in a coma, prostrated herself before the Lord, and then rose to perform what has come to be known as the dance of the weary soul. She whirled and whirled in the ecstasy of patriotism till her legs could stand no longer. She went up to the foot of the pedestal whereon rested the marble image of the deity, and stabbed herself through the chest with a dagger she invariably carried on her person. Blood gushed out, and soon she lay there motionless, her limped limbs telling the story of yet another immortal act of bravery in a bid to live up to the highest norms of honour known to humankind.

Bards sing her praises, refer to her as a wonder-woman, a cupola of chastity, a martyr and, above all, a patriot of the most colourful plumage. Composers of folk songs draw inspiration from the spirit of self-sacrifice she has come to symbolize, and the common man reveres her memory and salutes her with deep, heartfelt respect. She was not one of the many; she went to her death alone, defiant and unbending. Akbar was once again disappointed. He was not destined to have a Mewar princess in his harem.

Following Kumari Jaiwanti's act of self-immolation, twenty-nine high-ranking ladies of the castle did the traditional *Jauhar*, and when Akbar entered the fort three days later the sight of the charred bodies appalled him. He asked Raja Man Singh to identify the dead damsels, and then arrange for their funeral in accordance with Hindu rites. Except for seven princesses of the royal blood, the rest could not be recognized. However, later it was found out that eleven of them were unmarried daughters of Rajput chieftains, six wives of the besieged courtiers, and five maidservants of the Raja's seraglio.

The surrender by Surjan Rai was an ignoble let-down, a cowardly violation of the pledge he had taken to defend the castle with his life. His top generals were dumbfounded, and prepared themselves in the Rajput tradition to die fighting rather than live in dishonour. Historians are surprisingly silent about the sequence of events following the handover to Akbar of the golden keys of the fort, but it may not be a wrong surmise that, as at Chitor, the last scene was a drama in which blood and death were at the centre of the stage. Akbar won a battle, but came very near to losing the war against social injustices he claimed to be waging.

Chitor and Ranthambor, in the words of an unknown poet, are the two biggest monuments to Akbar's folly:

The Padshah came, the Padshah won. Nay, nay, the Padshah lost. The Padshah received the golden keys of Ranthambor. With those he will open one day the secret chamber of his conscience and find therein bundles of remorse wrapped in the blood-stained cloth of regret and penitence. He has remitted poll-tax. He has given seats of honour to Hindu chieftains at his court. He has wed many Hindu wives. Temple bells ring in the fort at Agra every morning. He even wears the sacred

thread, and shows reverence to the sun and the moon and the stars. But listen O' Akbar Padshah, the stains of blood are not easy to wash. You are a conqueror. You have palaces, vast hoards of wealth, diamonds, pearls, rubies and countless consorts of dazzling beauty. All these, O' Akbar Padshah, will count for little on the Day of Judgment. The shrieks of the Rajkumari will then ring in your ears, and you will rue the day when you raped Chitor and subjected Ranthambor to heartless slaughter. I am not an oracle, but a poor peasant who loves his hills and forests and his hut as dearly as you do your garden, lakes and palaces. Forgive me if I have spoken bluntly. This is my profession.

Abul Fazl and Badaouni give a different version of the surrender. According to them, Surjan Rai realized the hopelessness of his position, and decided to throw in the towel. The fate of Chitor was, to him, a warning that could not be ignored. Incessant bombardment by Mughal batteries aroused panic among the defenders, and they tended to agree with the leader that resistance was an act of suicide. Surjan, thereupon, took the initiative of sending his sons Dada and Bhoj to negotiate peace with the besiegers. Akbar welcomed their approaches, and held out the promise of an honourable settlement if the castle was surrendered to him with all its hoarded riches. Emissaries took note of the demand, and said they had no authority to accept or reject it without the Raja's approval. Akbar agreed to their return to the castle for consultations, and offered to send along with them his principal adviser, Hussain Quli Khan\* for a dialogue with their father.

According to Abul Fazl, some Rajputs took a strong exception to the Raja's overtures with Akbar, and threatened a rebellion if the fort was used as a bargaining counter for peace:

Peace with honour means only that the castle should remain in our hands. "Fort or war" is our slogan. If the Mughals do not accept our terms, then let them prepare for a war to the finish. The Emperor should be told clearly that Ranthambor is impregnable. He will not be able to take it even if the siege lasts for

\*Hussain Quli Khan was later given the title of Khan-i-Jahan.

a thousand years. Ranthambor is our mother. Woe befall anyone who tries to take it by force, as also him who surrenders it out of cowardice.

It is not recorded anywhere how the Raja was able to clip the wings of the hawks in his camp. What we are told is that the negotiations ended successfully. Within three days, the fort was presented to Akbar as if on a platter, and that Surjan Rai and his sons were given extensive Jagirs in the east. Abul Fazl extolls to the skies the Emperor's large-heartedness and diplomatic skill, and says with apparent pride that "the Lord of the age achieved without bloodshed in a month what took the great Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji over five thousand dead and a year to attain."

There are so many blanks and question-marks in Abul Fazl's account that one is inclined to disbelieve it. Though in both versions, Surjan Rai comes out as a faint-hearted self-seeker, yet the story given by Colonel Tod appears more credible. Also it fits in well with Akbar's practice of using disguise as a device in the art of governance; it too leaves some blanks and unanswered queries, but these do not generate the type of incredulity that Abul Fazl's version does.

The broad fact is that Ranthambor fell to Akbar without a serious fight. Militarily, the fort was important to him as a spring-board for further thrusts in the south. Its possession also brought to him a degree of prestige which advanced his status politically. What was perhaps more, a dent in the authority of Mewar and its feudatory was a source of solace to the Jaipur princes who had hitched their fortunes, for better or for worse, to the court at Agra. Akbar valued their support. He did not want them to be singled out as black sheep by their compatriots. Surjan Rai's defection soon resulted in many Rajput houses aligning themselves, through marriage or otherwise, with the Mughals. Mewar continued to be the only exception. In Rana Pratap Akbar found one who was more than his match in tenacity and will-power.

## Search for Son and Successor

Sher Shah lost his life in May 1545, while engaged in the siege of the fort of Kalanjar in Bundhelkhand. The death was an indirect sequel to his infatuation with an exceedingly beautiful Rajput girl known to be inside the citadel. For five long months, he kept his heavy batteries in check lest the girl be injured or, in the event of capture of the fort, be led, with or against her will, to join in the final immolating ceremonial of Jauhar. When in the end he launched an assault supported by heavy guns, a cannon-ball ricocheted after hitting the rampart, and set ablaze an ammunition dump; the fire could not be brought under control before the Afghan Emperor received burns which proved fatal. He, however, lived till the fort was captured. Search for the girl proved abortive. Rajputnis, high and low, preferred death to capture by the enemy. The news of the self-sacrifice perhaps hastened Sher Shah's end.

The story of the manner of Sher Shah's death fascinated Akbar. At Chitor and Ranthambor he had drawn blanks: no blue-blooded Rajput senorita came to his hand at those centres of Hindu aristocracy. Perhaps he would be more lucky at Kalanjar, the last of the strongholds of Rajput resistance in northern India. His lust for conquest, as also his passion for life, was insatiable. Orders were given to Munim Khan Quqshal, a general of high repute, to mount an invasion and force Rana Ram Chand to surrender, preferably without a fight. Force was to be used as the last resort. Akbar was at pains to forestall yet another mass self-sacrifice by the pick of Hindu women.



Akbar was keen to capture the fort, and, at the same time, to avoid bloodshed. Munim Khan was able to kill both these birds without firing a shot. He managed to plant in the enemy camp such stories about the strength of the invading army as left the chicken-hearted Ram Chand suing for peace before the imperialists reached Kalanjar. To protesting, proud Rajput generals, he retorted:

As compared to Chitor and Ranthambor, our castle is only a house of mud. To court certain annihilation is no bravery. We have no chance. We ask for peace with honour, and if that is not vouchsafed we shall fight to the last man. Ours is not an abject offer of surrender. God is my witness that I am not deceiving myself. My responsibility is heavy. The lives of thousands of our followers and their womenfolk hinge on our decision. I have done no wrong. Let history be my judge.

History judges Ram Chand to be a senile coward, unworthy of the high position Fate had thrust upon him. Kalanjar was as strong as either Chitor or [Ranthambor. Throughout the ages, Rajputs sought glory by waging unequal wars. Death, not life, was the means they adopted to win fame and immortality. Rawal, Sangram and Pratap never bowed their heads before an enemy, and their names shine like lustrous pearls in the long history of the Orient. Ram Chand and the like are forgotten figures whom one remembers occasionally only to find fault with their mettle and to abuse their pusillanimity. It is an irony of fate that the advent of Akbar as a conqueror coincided with the emergence of a set of weak and worthless poltroons in the states of Rajasthan; they quailed, and failed miserably to stand up to Akbar's wars of aggression. It will be a futile exercise in speculation to try to determine whether Akbar won because of his own strength or because of the cowardice of his many opponents.

Rana Ram Chand opened the gates of the castle after only a day's siege by Munim Khan. The golden keys were presented to the Mughal general on a platter studded with diamonds and rubies—a form of surrender signifying that all the wealth in the castle belonged to the victor. The Rana and his family were, however, permitted to carry their personal belongings to the principality given them as Jagir near Allahabad. The fate that befell the officers and other inmates of the fort is not known. History books do

not record either a Jauhar or liquidation by the sword of those who might have resisted the takeover. A folk-song of Uttar Pradesh is perhaps the only clue to events following the surrender:

Akbar came. Akbar won. He carried away all our wealth and women. Even leopards and tigers in our jungles shed tears at our plight. The cuckoo's voice is laden with sorrow at the desolation that now envelops Kalanjar. Oh, Raja Ram Chand, what 'did you do? Why did you lay down your arms? Why did you not fight like your brave ancestors? Did you not remember the exploits of Raja Kirat Singh? He fought the Afghans for five months in a bold bid to preserve his independence. The mighty Sher Shah trembled before him like a fig leaf in high wind. He was blown out under the walls of our sacred fort. Songs about the invincibility of Kalanjar are sung all over Bharat-Varash. Why did you panic and leave us at the mercy of the Mughals? Our Raja is our father. We are grieved at your departure. We are 'now orphans. Rajput glory is gone for ever. May Lord Mahadev show us the way.

It was on 11 August 1569, that Akbar received the news of the capture of Kalanjar. The whole of northern India was now at his mercy. His authority was unchallengeable. The Rajputs were on the run, and competing with one another to seek his favour. According to Abul Fazl, Rana Kalyan Mal of Bikaner "sent a petition" requesting the Emperor to give a place to his niece\* in the royal harem, and "the Great Luminary, the Dispenser of Justice agreed to the request out of compassion."

Raja Bhagwan Das was deputed to escort the young princess to Agra. Shortly afterwards, a similar "representation" was received from Rawal Hari Rai of Jaisalmer, and Akbar "not wanting to hurt the feelings of his subjects condescended to take his daughter in marriage."

Though hisseraglio had grown to the dimension of a fair-size township, Akbar was not a happy man. He yearned for the gift of a son. None of his many hundred bed companions had so far been able to oblige him. The twins born to Jodha Bai in 1564 died in

\*She was the daughter of Kalyan Mal's younger brother Kahana Rai.

infancy. What was the use of all the conquests, he lamented one day, if there was no one to succeed him? Like Babar and Humayun, he was obsessed with the fear of early death, and often shared his gloomy thought with Hindu and Muslim holy men whom he invited for discussions in his palace. The Yogi-seat\* in the Diwan-i-Khas was occupied always by a specially invited divine with whom Akbar conversed directly on such spiritual problems as baffled him. One day the Emperor asked his honoured guest (a Hindu Sanyasi of Mathura) about the duties of a king. The reply saddened Akbar:

A king, O' Master of the Universe, must first of all look after the interest of his subjects; he needs to be more merciful than just; it is his karma to be fearless in defence of Truth and ruthless in the rooting out of all forms of evil.

A king is like a shepherd who must preserve himself and his family for the sake of the herd. The latter will go astray, starve and die if there is no one to guide them to regions abounding in grass and water. It is, therefore, a king's duty to look after himself and ensure succession, and to see that the future king is brought up in full knowledge of his rights, duties and obligations. The guardians of the soul of this ancient land have emphasized time and again the imperative of preserving dynastic lineage. Else, it will be all chaos, and man will kill man for the sake of power. God has given man a short span of life. A king, howsoever mighty and intelligent, will be unable to accomplish in one life-span what is required of him; hence the inescapable obligation of a king to rear children who can carry the works forward. Break in lineage is a curse that may spell ruination for a nation. This also holds good for the common man. Sons are the bridges that unite ages, and make it possible for the humankind to maintain a uniform pace of growth. Else, O' Bestower of priceless gifts, the sun, the moon and the stars will come to a halt in their courses.

Akbar listened to the discourse with rapt attention. When the

\*Yogi-seat was instituted by Akbar after the capture of Chitor. Close to the royal throne in Diwan-i-Khas, it was occupied by spiritual teachers invited for discussions.

Yogi raised his right hand to bless and to indicate that he had finished, the Padshah stepped down the Vishnu throne, walked up to the aged preceptor, stood deferentially before him for a few seconds, and then left with the abruptness of a scared charger. For two days he did not come out of his private chambers. Neither did he allow any of the Begums to intrude on his self-imposed seclusion.

On the third day, Akbar announced his decision to travel to Sikri on foot. There resided, amidst rocks and beasts, Sheikh Salim Chishti, a man of God known for his piety and spiritual attainments. He had neither money nor contacts with the outside world. Alms by a few devout persons kept the saint's body and soul together. Not unoften was the Sheikh found in deep meditation completely oblivious of what was happening around him. His equation with God was said to be of total submission to His will. He was loth to meet kings and men of wealth lest his mind be distracted and the totality of his merger with the Absolute compromised.

The news of Akbar's decision to visit him aroused his curiosity. What could a penniless darvesh do to help a world-conquering monarch? There was not even a wooden stool in his hut for the Emperor to sit on. For drink he had nothing to offer except water from a nearby spring. Of food and fruit he had none with which to welcome the king. The Sheikh swept his cottage, spread on the floor a piece of time-worn cloth, and waited for Akbar's arrival.

The twenty-three dusty miles to the west of Agra were covered by Akbar and his small entourage, which included Sheikh Muhammad Bokhari and Hakim Ain-ul-Mulk, in one and a half days. It was near noon when the Emperor, dressed simply in white cotton and without wearing any insignia of royalty, walked up the rough-cut flight of stairs leading to the Sheikh's hut. The latter, out of humility that comes from proximity to God, rushed out of his humble dwelling to meet the royal visitor. The ensuing scene has been attempted to be captured by many artists, but none has been able to fully depict the emotional depth of the meeting. Akbar leaned forward to bow to and touch the knees of the preceptor. The latter drew back and held out his arms to welcome and embrace the monarch. For a moment, it seemed the world had come to a standstill and that the holy spirit had descended on the rocks of Sikri.

Preliminaries over, the Sheikh recited a couple of *ayats* from the Quran, and led the shahinshah to his hut about fifty yards away. At the threshold, he stopped as if to apologise for the bareness of his dwelling. Akbar read his thoughts, gave a knowing smile, stepped inside, and proclaimed aloud that God be thanked for giving him access to "this abode of peace." "How I wish I could live here for ever. This place is heaven, heaven, heaven. Allah Himself seems to be in residence here. Permit me, revered Sheikh, to share your lodging for at least a few days. My soul yearns to merge with the infinite, and it is only here that I can attain the much-longed-for peace of mind."

The Sheikh was embarrassed. He did not know how to react to the kingly request. Hymns from the holy book, wherein are recorded the virtues of humility, readily came to his mind. He recited them in a low tone, and then stood motionless, not daring to ask the Emperor to squat on the seat he had prepared for him. Akbar came to his rescue. Not waiting to be invited, he downed himself to sit cross-legged on the dusty floor, and requested the Sheikh to sit on the piece of cloth on his right. He said:

I have come to do you homage, to sit at your feet and seek your blessings in the performance of my duties. For many years I have been wanting to come on a pilgrimage to this hallowed abode. In the fulfillment of my wish, I see a design of Destiny, a command of Allah, a coming together of all the unseen forces to my rescue. I solicit your benediction, my master! Bless me, and initiate me into the secrets that sustain the facade of this material world. Though I am a king; yet I consider myself the lowliest of all mankind, an humble scrubber of floors of the Divine court, an instrument of His will, an insignificant moth in search of the light of His beneficence. I have come to sit at your blessed feet, and learn first-hand the mystiques of life and death. I depend upon your generosity and your solicitation to the Great God on my behalf. No more shall I say for the present. I beg to be permitted, O', knower of the ultimate, to bask in the sunshine of your company for a few days. Turn me not away. I am a humble seeker after Truth.

The Sheikh was touched. Tears, not words, came out in response to Akbar's submission. He rushed out to collect whatever food he

could lay his hands upon. A royal guest, he felt, could not be welcomed with verses from the Quran alone. Akbar came out too. He sat pensively on a boulder, and waited for the Sheikh's return. When he saw his host coming hut-ward with a leaf-ful of blackberries in his hand. Akbar rose, stood his ground respectfully, and when the Sheikh offered him the freshly picked fruit, he accepted the fare with expressions of deep gratitude. A party of the Emperor's entourage stood at a distance, watching the proceedings with a certain degree of awe. Akbar beckoned them to come over and pay their respects to the holy man. He also ordered that the construction of a mosque and a school in the vicinity of the hut should be taken in hand immediately. Food for the entire population of Sikri was to be prepared in the royal kitchen for as long as he remained in the township. An all-weather cottage was to be put up for the Sheikh's residence, and ample provisions made for his comfort and also for the upkeep of the institutions proposed to be set up.

A man of a few words, the Sheikh hung down his head in submission to Allah, and said:

Your Majesty, poverty is my most valued asset. I beg not to be deprived of my riches. The ancients say that God makes ready to go out of the window as soon as affluence comes in through the door. I would request Your Majesty to leave me alone with my poverty and my God. Thereupon hinges my happiness and the self-realization that I am constantly in search of. For whatever they are worth, my prayers and blessings will always be with you. I shall invoke the Creator of the Universe for fulfillment of your inward desires. In His mercy, He may respond with favour. My faith in Him is total. Let us all pray here and now, and remind ourselves that not a leaf of tree moves without His will, and that what He does not do is all for the good of mankind.

The small assemblage raised their hands, and praised God for His bounties. Akbar was overwhelmed. He spent the next few hours in the Sheikh's hut sharing in full measure the saint's worldly indigence as also his spiritual affluence. When the time came for the Emperor to leave, Sheikh Salim bid him farewell with a prophecy that God would bless him with three sons, and that succes-

sion to the house of Timur was assured for many generations. Salim also prophesied a long life for the Emperor, and told him that his conquests would dazzle the eyes of the world. Insofar as these readings of the future presaged the fulfillment of his inmost wishes, Akbar was elated, and he left Sikri with the conviction that his place in history was pre-ordained.

Mariam Zamani (Jodha Bai) was with child at this time. Akbar ordered a small house to be built for her "under the shadow of the Sheikh's hut." Thither she was asked to shift till the child was born. For six months, she lived "near to God and under the spiritual umbrella of Sheikh Salim" before she delivered herself of a son on 30 August 1569.

Akbar was at the time on a hunting expedition near Gwalior. Heeding the advice of Ahmad Shah Bokhari, an occultist well-versed in astronomy, the Emperor suppressed his joy, and delayed seeing the infant *Wali-Ahad* for forty-one days. Belief in India is still prevalent that a son born after a period of long waiting would bring luck to the family if the father avoids seeing him for over a month. It may be recalled that Humayun did not set his eyes on Akbar till he was thirty-one days old.

After the expiry of the prescribed period, and when the stars were in auspicious positions, Akbar went to Sikri. The court astrologers, chronogram-writers, poets, musicians, heads of religions, *ulema* and the nobility were already there to welcome him. As on the previous occasion, the Sheikh greeted Akbar at the foot of the unhewn rock which formed a sort of stairs leading to his hut. The meeting, according to Abdul Qadir Badaouni, was "a get-together of two men firm in their belief that the destinies of nations and individuals are in the hand of God, and that nothing happens without His will." Akbar praised Allah, and so did the Sheikh. Together, they wended their way through stone and scrub to the little villa where Jodha Bai was dotting over what Abul Fazl calls "the choicest apple from the garden of paradise." When a *kaniz* led the Emperor to the Malika's chamber, the courtiers lining the passage bowed low, and prayed for the long life of the new-born prince. It is believed that Akbar greeted the Amber princess with a Rajput-style love-pat on her head, and presented her with nine pairs of necklaces and ear-rings valued at over a lakh of *ashrafis*. To the infant son, he gave a hug, and made the announcement that the prince would bear the name Salim. A greater homage

could not have been paid to the Sheikh.

Thereafter, *Ahl-i-Murad* took the stage.\* Chronographers vied with one another to set the year of the much-awaited birth in fine Persian words and phrases. The three improvisations to catch the Emperor's fancy were "a royal pearl of the great ocean," "a pearl of the Shahinshah's mansion" and "a pearl of Akbar Shah's casket." The composers were given rich gifts and robes of honour.

As was customary, famed astrologers were commissioned to prepare horoscopes in accordance with both the Greek and Indian systems. The greying Maulana Cand was the most celebrated of them all; his horoscope of Akbar is to this day regarded as the acme of astrological skill. It took the Maulana three years to study, coordinate and interpret the positions of the heavenly bodies at the time of Salim's birth. The Greek system he specialized in was in some fundamental respects different from the Indian scheme of tabulations. But, surprisingly, the predictions based on either calculation were remarkably similar. Abul Fazl, himself a brilliant exponent of the science of astronomy, says he was keen to coalesce the two systems, and prepare a horoscope of "this vermilion mark on the forehead of Fortune," but his many time-consuming duties prevented him from realizing his ambition. His analyses and syntheses of the four horoscopes of Akbar are considered masterpieces of astronomical exposition.

The celebrations at Sikri struck a spiritual, austere note. The stress there was on prayers, alms-giving and the feeding of the poor. It was when the Emperor moved to Agra after three days that the dancing girl and the wine cup came into play. Massive entertainments were held on three successive full-moon nights, and the Emperor broke his own records of generosity by giving rich awards and extensive Jagirs to the elite of the court. The ranks of Rajas Bhagwan Das and Man Singh were raised by two thousand horses each, and they were presented with robes of honour graded next only to those bestowed upon members of the royal family. Jodha Bai returned to the capital when Salim was

\* *Ahl-i-Murad* were one of the three divisions of the court created by Emperor Humayun. They included, among others, poets, artists, architects, singers and musicians. The other two categories were *Ahl-i-Daulat* (men of wealth and prosperity) and *Ahl-i-Sadat* (men of success).



nearly three months old. Akbar wanted her to live under the shadow of the Khwaja for what was considered the critical ninety-day period.

Hereafter, Sikri became a regular maternity ward for the royal harem. Any of the wives or mistresses of the Emperor becoming pregnant were sent there to take advantage of the advice and benediction of the Chishti. The next to repair to the holy hut was Bibi Salima Begum who, contrary to the general expectation, gave birth to a daughter on 21 November 1569. The child was named Khanum.\* Soon after, Salima Sultan Begum, widow of Bairam Khan, whom Akbar married in 1561, was ready to do the twenty-three mile journey to Sikri. She gave birth to a son on 7 June 1570. Akbar named him Murad Shah. Two more daughters—Shukr-un-Nisa and Aram Banu Begum\*\* were born before the third promised son, Daniyal, was born at Ajmer to a concubine in 1572.

In all probability, Daniyal is a corruption of the name Daniel—a Jesuit missionary from Goa in whose house the prince was born. Holy men, of any sect or religion, fascinated Akbar; he regarded them as the specially chosen executors of God's plans for humanity. It is significant that his three sons were born under the shadow of men known to have established equation of trust with the Creator. That the forecast of Sheikh Salim came true sparked off in Akbar a God-consciousness which, in due course, led him to launch daring experiments in socio-religious fields. Much of his greatness may, with reason, be attributed to the dominance in his character of respect for the spiritualist.

\*Khanum Begum, also known as Shahzada Khanum, was married to Mirza Muzaffar Hussain in 1594.

\*\*Aram Banu Begum died unmarried in Jahangir's reign.

## Daring Blitz Against Gujarat

With the forts of Muttra, Chitor, Ranthambor and Kalanjar in his possession, and the princes Salim and Murad tucked safely in royal cradles, Akbar's self-confidence soared high; he had acquired footholds for new and bigger conquests and also the means to keep intact the line of the house of Timur. Many years later, he told Abul Fazl:

After the birth of Shaikhu Baba, a change came over me. No more was I uncertain of the future. New ideas, new urges possessed me. The vision of an empire united in faith and loyalty led me to formulate plans for adventures bigger than I had undertaken before. Here was a compulsion which I attributed to the will of God. To try to resist it was to run against what I considered to be the course of history. Unlike before, there was now no doubt in my mind, no hesitation, no flickering of the lights of determination. The world to me became a wonderful manifestation of the grandeur of Allah. There was light all around—colour, gaiety and the dazzling splendour of the many forms of creation. Often I used to pray silently in thankfulness and in wonderment. A feeling was inescapable that God had chosen me for the unfolding of some great design. This conviction made me fearless. I rode high on the wave of optimism. There was nothing that was not within my reach.

It was in this state of surging self-reliance that Akbar received

a communication from Itmad Khan, one of the seven aspirants to the near-vacant throne in Gujarat, for help to "restore order and put a stop to the sufferings of the people of this ancient land." The *de jure* ruler, Muzaffar Shah III, he pointed out, was helpless in the hands of a clique of unscrupulous officers:

They have neither the heart to be moved by the continuing misery of the population nor the intelligence to administer the state with justice. The market of contention has become brisk. If this state of affairs continues for long, the kingdom of Zaffar Shah, of sacred memory, will go up in smoke. Gujarat has been a citadel of Islam ever since Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji subjugated it in the seventh century.\*

The present ruler, as Your Majesty is no doubt aware, was brought to the throne to save the house of Zaffar Shah from extinction.\*\* The reports of his doubtful legitimacy are widely current. Attempts to oust him by self-seeking adventurers have plunged the country into turmoil. We seek your assistance in this hour of trial. Factional warfare is currently waging furiously. The Mughal umbrella may save us from ruination.

Here was a God-sent opportunity to extend the borders of his Empire. Akbar decided to intervene, not with the intention of buttressing up Muhammad Shah, but to annex the kingdom.

To give moral justification to the planned invasion, Akbar claimed that Gujarat belonged to him by the right of inheritance. Humayun had ruled over it for nine months prior to his ouster from Hindustan by Sher Shah in 1540. Also the route to Mecca lay through Gujarat. This was another good reason for the extension of the border of the empire up to the sea in the west. The real reason was, however, not bandied about: Gujarat was the richest part of Hindustan, and a great centre of commerce with Turkey, Syria, Persia, Transoxiana and the countries of Europe. The stories of its fabulous wealth fascinated the Padshah. So did the tales of Hindu gods and goddesses flocking on the hill tops

\*Seventh century (Muslim calendar) is equivalent to the thirteenth century of the Christian era.

\*\*In the fight for succession after the death of Bahadur Shah in 1537, Itmad-ul-Mulk placed on the throne a boy named Nathu who, he swore, was the son of Muhammad Shah.

and shores of the picturesque lakes of this peninsula to indulge their ecstatic, spiritual pleasures. He seems to have been aware that Lord Krishna spent the best part of his life at Dwarka, and that many Hindu and Jain saints made Mount Abu a rendezvous for their religious exercises. The temple of Somnath beckoned him, not because of its association with Mahmud Ghaznavi but because of the divine aura that enveloped it. In Gujarat Akbar saw a vast treasure of material and spiritual wealth that would give added lustre to his empire. His mind was made up: the territory must be subjugated whatever the cost. Akbar decided to lead the campaign himself.

An army of ten thousand, with all the paraphernalia of siege and open warfare, was sent in advance under the command of Kahan-i-Kalan Mir Muhammad Khan Ataka. As was customary, a section of the royal harem accompanied the Ataka. The march out of Sikri was leisurely. The first fifty miles were covered in a week. Akbar himself trooped out on 4 July 1572, at the head of a band of five hundred trusted officers which included, among others, Rajas Bhagwan Das and Man Singh. Despite heat, the Emperor set a hectic pace and made the long, rough trek to Ajmer in nine days. On the way, he indulged his penchant for big game hunting, and once surprised his followers by not raising his bow against a tiger which showed up all of a sudden on the left. To kill a tiger in that position was considered an affront to the deity of the jungle, and Akbar was resolved to keep the gods on his side on this mission. The beast gave a parting roar and disappeared, "as if to say thanks to the Lord of the Universe [Akbar] for sparing his life."

At Ajmer, as on the previous such occasions, "the river of the Padshah's bounty overflowed," and Akbar left the holy city fully convinced that the blessings of Sheikh Chishti would give him victory. Midway between Ajmer and Nagaur, he received the joyful news of the birth of his third son Daniyal. The camp astrologers pronounced the event a happy augury, and prepared rough horoscopes to show that the birth synchronized with propitious positions of the planets and their satellites. Maulana Cand, however, observed that the prince bore "a slight shadow" which could be neutralized if he was shifted from the place of birth (Ajmer) after thirty days. Akbar agreed, and ordered that the new-born should be transferred to the Ambar palace at Jaipur on

the thirty-first day, and that thereafter his upbringing would be in the hands of the Rani.\*

The march to Ahmedabad was eventless except for sporadic fighting against some Rajput clans who could not reconcile themselves to Mughal intrusion on their territories. At one place, a daredevil troupe of one hundred and fifty devotees of Lord Siva hurled themselves recklessly upon the rear of the advancing army, and were cut to pieces to a man. The imperial force was fully prepared to meet such eventualities. The Ataka was under orders to show no leniency to the enemy whether he be Muslim or Hindu. Akbar was relentless on the battlefield.

The approach of the massive Mughal army struck terror in the hearts of the defenders of Ahmedabad. Muzaffar Shah, a gutless imbecile, fled the capital after exhorting his men "to die fighting in defence of our territory, our heritage and our hearths and homes." His call fell on deaf ears, and the commanders opened the gates of the city before a shot was fired. The population of "the greatest city of the world" gave Akbar a quiet welcome, not knowing what was in store for them—a general massacre or a benevolent reprieve. The surrender pleased the Emperor, and he issued a *firman* to announce amnesty and to declare Gujarat a part of the Empire.

Parties were sent out in pursuit of the fleeing King, and it was not long before the royal coat and insignia of Gujarat were found discarded at the edge of a cornfield about twenty miles from Ahmedabad. A search party combed the field, and soon came upon a pale-as-death monarch hiding under a heap of corn. He offered no resistance, and asked his captors to take him to the Emperor.

Akbar received Muzaffar Shah in the audience hall of the palace, accepted his submission, and granted him a small allowance for life. Akbar's wrath, however, fell heavily on a section of the population found engaged in loot and acts of hooliganism. He had them trampled by drunken elephants. This was a warning which the people of Gujarat did well to heed. For as long as they remained peaceful, Akbar treated them with consideration and

\*The Rani perhaps meant the wife of Raja Bihari Mal, father of Jodha Bai. The fact that Daniyal was the son of a concubine perhaps influenced Akbar's decision.

even generosity. Abul Fazl writes that a Gujarati is "a dough compounded out of timidity, deceit and falsehood and then leavened with a little honesty, simplicity and humility." The Emperor liked them for one part of their composition, and tended to ignore the other as a common human failing.

Soon the heads of principalities and other chieftains gathered in Ahmedabad to pay their homage and seek instructions for the future administration of their charges. The *khutba* was read in Akbar's name in all principal mosques of the kingdom. New coins were ordered to be struck, and proclamations to mark the end of the Zaffar Shahi dynasty were made by the beat of drum. The Government of Ahmedabad was entrusted to Khan-i-Azam Aziz Koka, and several experienced officers were detailed to assist him in the difficult task of restoring normalcy. This done, Akbar set out on a visit to the port of Cambay. When he saw the sea for the first time, the Emperor was overwhelmed by the grandeur of the spectacle: "Allah is truly great! The sea and the mountains are perhaps His greatest manifestations." He went on a short cruise on a ship, displaying a child-like interest in its navigational and other technical details.

Some Western historians are amazed that the potentialities of the sea and the ship in his scheme of conquests did not immediately make a mark on Akbar's mind. The land, it is pointed out, obsessed him, and he failed to envisage himself as the master of the seas as well. The implied criticism is perhaps not justified. The Timurid tradition extolled the virtues of the horse and the gun, and Akbar had had no opportunity to learn about the military potential of the ship. Later, when he came in contact with Portuguese missionaries, he evinced a keen interest in the science of maritime warfare, and even played about for some time with the idea of combining land and sea power to gain the mastery of the world. He wanted to send diplomatic-cum-trade missions to Portugal, Spain and Turkey, but his many preoccupations within Hindustan prevented him from realizing his ambition.

While still at Cambay, Akbar received a report that the Mirzas—Ibrahim Hussain, Muhammad Hussain, Shah Hussain and Masud Hussain—were once again on the war path and contemplating a revolt against the Mughal authority in Gujarat. Following their [last unsuccessful confrontation with the imperial forces at Ujjain, the-never-say-die quartette sought refuge in Gujarat and,

with the help of elements opposed to the Muzaffar regime, carved out for themselves a semi-independent small kingdom which, among other places, contained the important forts of Champanir, Broach and Surat. They affirmed their loyalty to Akbar when the latter took Ahmedabad and proclaimed himself the master of Gujarat. Their submission was, however, only a tactic to gain time for an opportunity to assert themselves and oust the Mughals from the peninsula. Murder by Ibrahim of Rustam Khan, a local chieftain who made no secret of his support for the Emperor, was an act of treacherous defiance which Akbar was in no mood to overlook, much less condone. His reaction was sharp and immediate: "I shall take the field against him myself. We leave tomorrow morning. A high-speed squad of five hundred horsemen will accompany me. The bulk of the army may follow later. Fast movement is the crying need. I must strike at once."

Against the advice of some of his conservative counsellors, Akbar left Cambay as planned, and pressed forward without stopping for the next twenty-four hours with such rapidity that when he reached the Mahanadi, he had with him only some forty horses. From a passing Hindu priest he learnt that Ibrahim was entrenched in great force at Sarnal, a small town built on a low hill on the opposite bank of the river. Akbar's companions were alarmed, and advised the Emperor to wait for reinforcements before crossing the river. At this critical moment, as luck would have it, the van of the main army came up. Even with this addition, the force numbered only one hundred and fifty or, as some say, only a hundred men. Notwithstanding this handicap, Akbar ordered an immediate attack. Man Singh submitted that he should be given the honour of leading the van. Akbar's reply was typical: "Today there is no van or rear, no right, left or centre. We have no army to divide. Let us keep together, and set our hearts to the combat." Man Singh insisted that he be given an opportunity to show his loyalty by acting as a shield to the person of his sovereign, and pulled out his sword to swear allegiance and unswerving resolve to protect the Emperor. Akbar appreciated his sentiment and let him be the first to plunge his horse into the river. The small force reached the opposite bank safely. Meanwhile, Ibrahim had left the town with some two thousand men, and positioned himself on high ground in anticipation of the attack. The stretch between the river and the town was virtually impassable because of thick

jungle, ditches and masses of rock. Akbar, however, threw caution to the winds, and moved fearlessly towards Sarnal. Abul Fazl's narrative of what followed bears quotation:

The tiger of the forest of courage displayed the power of God and slowly advanced by the narrow ways. Raja Bhagwan Das was beside him, and when on every side there was hard fighting three daring men rushed from out the ranks of the opponents against the lion-hearted sovereign. One of them lunged at Raja Bhagwan Das and aimed his javelin at him, but the Raja stood firm in his stirrups and attacked him with his spear. The javelin did not hit its mark, and the Raja so smote that wretch with his spear that he was overthrown. Just then the other two attacked His Majesty. The thorn bushes were an obstacle, and the Khan-i-Alam Shah Quli Khan and some others, who were near at hand, were so unfortunate as not to be able to assist. That tiger-slayer and world champion when he saw that those two evildoers were coming near him urged on his horse and jumped over the thorns and in front of them. The glory of the divine radiance frightened them, and they fled. Ibrahim Hussain Mirza was vanquished by the fortune of the King.

This was the first time that Akbar was engaged in hand-to-hand fighting on a battle field. After this his courage and dare devilry became legendary. He was convinced that God was on his side, and that his daring was only a reflection of the divine dynamo that propelled him. Combined with his great physical prowess, this belief became the biggest single architect of his greatness as a conqueror. At Sarnal he came of age as a soldier of fortune, and his reputation for invincibility spread throughout the land. His name became a synonym for victory, and many poets competed with one another in lauding his qualities as a dauntless military campaigner. Wrote Maulana Mansoor:

He is great; he is sublime: he is the dawn of Destiny. Enemies shudder at his approach; they flee before him like morning dew at the rise of the sun; he is invincible, eternal in fame and glory. The light that comes out of his forehead is the despair of his foes; it cannot be countered by swords and spears and stately soldiers; this light spells the doom of those who happen



to take the field against him. For his friends, the self-same effulgence is a source of solace, a means for the achievement of everlasting happiness. Oh Akbar Padshah, you are the master of mankind, the lord of the world, a supreme being outside the laws of cause and effect. We salute you. May you reign over us till eternity. Mansoor is not a puerile flatterer; he only tells the truth, and awakens the world through his verses to the realities of life and death.

The victory at Sarnal could be attributed partly to the valour of Raja Bhagwan Das. Akbar was pleased with his performance against heavy odds, especially the manner in which he lanced his adversaries in close fighting. The Emperor honoured him by the grant of a banner and kettle-drums, never before bestowed on a non-Muslim. Raja Man Singh also came in for royal appreciation and was given robes of honour of the highest distinction. Raja Todar Mal was also rewarded suitably for his bravery. The death in action of Bhupat Rai, son of Raja Bihari Mal, grieved Akbar. He had fought gallantly; when his lance was splintered, he leapt from his horse to engage the enemy with his dagger. He was, however, soon overpowered and killed. Similarly, Bhoj Rai, son of Raja Surjan Rai, lost his life in a spectacular duel with an adversary.

The investment of Surat was now undertaken. The fort surrendered, after a resistance of one month and seventeen days, on 26 February 1573. According to Abul Fazl, it was during this siege that Akbar came in contact with Portuguese missionaries from Goa, and showed a keen interest in their religion and culture. He treated them as "friends and guests," gave them a gracious reception, exchanged with them the usual gifts, held discussions with them on general European affairs, and finally gave them the permission to leave, saying: "We have benefited from your stay amidst us. It shall give us pleasure to welcome you at Sikri. Adequate arrangements for your stay there will be made. Please assure your Governor\* of our interest in cultivating friendly relations with the people of Portugal."

Some historians are of the view that the Portuguese actually came

\*The name of the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa at the time was Don Antonio de Noronha.

to Surat to offer support to the Mirzas against the invaders, and that they changed their plans when they came to know about the strength of Akbar's army. They then proceeded to make the best of an ugly situation, and stressed their friendship for the Emperor, Akbar saw through their pretence, but preferred not to take any hasty action. Reports of the Portuguese sea power no doubt influenced his decision to match their pretence with his own. Self-interest demanded that course. Akbar's diplomatic finesse in the end paid dividends. Never did the Portuguese take up arms against him. He kept them guessing till the end of his days.

Abul Fazl narrates with his usual literary flamboyance an event during the siege of Surat which throws considerable light on the anatomy of Akbar. One evening at a wine party, the conversation turned on the much talked-about Rajput disregard for life. One Mughal general told of a Rajput game "in which they posted two men on one side with naked pikes and placed two other exactly opposite who, upon a signal given, would rush upon the spears until the spikes came out of their backs." Declaring that he too would run upon his sword, Akbar took out his shimmering weapon from the golden scabbard, affixed the handle to the wall, and prepared to emulate the Rajput recklessness. Aghast, the assemblage did not know what to do. No one could muster courage to dissuade the drunken Emperor from his resolve. When Akbar was about to start on his death-embracing run, Raja Man Singh made a dash to knock the sword down; he succeeded but not before Akbar received a minor injury on his hand. Baulked, the Emperor's wrath fell on the Raja; he grappled the Rajput prince, threw him on the ground, and was near strangling him to death when Saiyed Muzaffar Khan intervened to avert a tragedy; he went so far as to twist the injured royal hand to stop Akbar from committing a murder. The party ended in a turmoil. The next morning, on being told what had happened, Akbar awarded the Raja and the Saiyed rich gifts for their loyalty and saving him from himself. Akbar did not touch wine for several weeks.

Following his defeat at Sarnal, Ibrahim fled towards Patan where he joined Mirzas Shah Hussain and Muhammad Hussain. However, the trio were unable to make a common cause. Ibrahim fled to the Punjab, and the last two were soon defeated by Akbar's forces. They repaired to the Deccan, taking along with them what-

ever treasures they could muster. Gulrukh Begum,\* wife of Ibrahim, had already gone to the south after the defeat of the Mirza at Sarnal.

On 3 April 1573, Akbar re-entered Ahmedabad where he halted ten days before leaving for Sikri. When he was within a day's march from Ajmer, news was brought to him that Ibrahim Mirza was dead. "A good riddance," the Emperor declared. The wily Mirza's continuous plottings in the Punjab were a source of concern to Akbar. With his passing, a threat to stability in the key western state came to an end. The manner of Ibrahim's death—he was waylaid and stabbed by a gang of fishermen—further strengthened Akbar's belief that disloyalty to him was on affront to God Himself.

The journey to Sikri via Ajmer was a leisurely one. The Emperor was relaxed. The booty he carried was of inestimable value. The hoarded riches of the kings of Gujarat were now in his custody, and like his grandfather Babar he distributed a part of it liberally among his generals and top courtiers. His munificence became legendary at Ajmer, the keepers of the *dargah* and other holy men receiving gifts of gold and pieces of the rare ancient Gujarat jewellery. Every adult male and female received an *ashrafi*—souvenir of a victory which Akbar attributed to the blessings of the Khwaja. A deaf and dumb seven-year old girl, praying soulfully in the vicinity of the mausoleum, touched Akbar's heart; he not only ordered a monthly pension for her, but also gave her poor parents for life a sizable piece of agricultural land. Many similar grants were made to others with dispiriting physical handicaps. Though the bulk of the beneficiaries were Muslims, Akbar made several gifts of land and money to Hindus as well. While coming out of the old fort, Akbar's eyes fell on a Bhil boy perched on the shoulders of his father. On being told that the boy was paralyzed up to the waist, Akbar asked Saiyed Muhammad Khan, who was riding close to get the child examined and treated by the royal hakim. In due course the child regained the strength of his leg muscles, and was employed as a door-keeper in the household of Mariam Zamani (Jodha Bai).

At the shrine itself, the Emperor made costly offerings, the

\*Gulrukh Begum was the daughter of Mirza Kamran, Humayun's younger brother.

centre-piece being a diamond-studded sheet of Gujarat brocade. He also presented to the community kitchen a giant-size copper *deg* in which pulao could be cooked for two thousand five hundred persons at one time. Akbar's reverence for and faith in the spiritual powers of the Chishti were deep-rooted. For seventeen years, he attended the annual *urs* at Ajmer without a break. Sometimes he went on pilgrimage to the shrine twice or thrice a year. It was not till he shifted his capital to the distant Lahore that his ardour flagged, but to the end of his days he never uttered the name of the saint without bowing his head in submission.

Like his ancestors, Akbar believed that the affairs of the world were influenced by the spiritual power of the living and dead men of God. To propitiate them was, according to him, obligatory on all those aspiring for a nook in the heaven.

Akbar reached Sikri on 2 June 1573. A week later, Hussain Quli Khan brought in nearly five hundred prisoners-of-war, among whom was Masud Hussain Mirza. Masud's eyes were sewed up, but the Emperor ordered the stitches to be removed, and gave his errant uncle a short lecture on the virtues of loyalty:

Our ancestors underwent great hardships to found and consolidate an empire away from their homes in Central Asia. They were not motivated by considerations of narrow self-interest; a burning desire to bring lustre to the house of Timur sustained them through thick and thin. The loyalty of their generals was perhaps their biggest weapon. But for this *esprit de corps*, they could not have succeeded in defeating the vastly superior armies which blocked their passage to Delhi. Disloyalty is a failing that God never forgives. I am prepared to forget your misdeeds, but your conscience will never condone them. Sin is man's worst enemy. Heed my words: the guilty wilt under the weight of their own wrong.

The other captives, according to Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad, were covered with the skins of hogs, asses and dogs; of these the ring-leaders died by the hand of the hangman, and the rest, including Masud, were pardoned.

On the same day, the head of Ibrahim Mirza was brought to Akbar from Multan, Saiyed Khan having had it cut off for the purpose. Akbar was pleased to receive this war trophy, and

ordered it to be hung on a pole in the centre of the city.

For the next six months, Akbar devoted himself to tying up the many administrative loose ends. Several changes in the top hierarchy of the court were made in a bid to root out corruption and ensure that the Governor and other officials in the provinces abided strictly by instructions from the capital. Akbar was an inflexible disciplinarian; nothing irked him more than negligence and disobedience, and he took steps to eliminate all those who tended to ignore his authority. A certain amount of resentment was an inevitable result of these harsh measures, but on the whole the administration improved and began to show signs of a new-found vitality.

Akbar was still in the midst of giving shape to his plan of reforms when the news came from Gujarat that the Mirzas Shah Hussain and Muhammad Hussain had returned from the Deccan and taken upon themselves to lead a rebellion against the imperial governor at Ahmedabad. Urgent requests for reinforcements were also received from the local commanders. The situation in the newest wing of the empire was fast worsening. The old disturbers of peace had come out from their hiding places to make common cause with the rebels. Ikhtiar-ul-Mulk, who was now in his seventies, joined some followers of the arch-malcontent Sher Khan Fauladi, and planned an assault on Ahmedabad. The reports of these plottings incensed Akbar. Determined to quell the rebellion once and for all, he quickly mustered a highly mobile force, and made ready to set out on a campaign which finally established his claim to greatness as a conqueror.

Raja Bhagwan Dass was sent in advance at the head of a well-equipped army of nearly ten thousand. Rajput and Mughal horsemen formed the spearhead of this force. A part of the royal harem accompanied the Raja. Akbar himself left on 23 August 1573, with a following of about five hundred, among whom were several noted generals. The party rode swift she-camels such as were usually employed on forced marches. Despite heat and the unfavourable terrain, Akbar covered the eight hundred rough and dusty miles to Patan in the unexampled space of nine days and nights. On 30 August about five miles south-east of Patan, he came up with his army and his harem. As soon as he had made rendezvous with a section of his army, he decided, without resting, without hesitation, without further reinforcements, to move on to

the relief of the hard-pressed Ahmedabad. A report that an army of twenty thousand was waiting to check his advance did not deter the Emperor from his resolve. Following a sharp, successful skirmish with the followers of Sher Khan Fauladi, Akbar sent Asaf Khan in advance to inform the beleaguered Aziz Koka that relief was coming. The army reached the outskirts of Ahmedabad almost unobserved and in complete order of battle; the sound of the royal trumpets and kettle-drums took Muhammad Hussain Mirza by surprise, as he could not bring himself to believe that the Emperor, who had been reported to be in Sikri on 22 August was leading the army in person. The speed with which Akbar travelled upset the Mirza's calculations, and he was compelled to make hasty preparations for battle. Akbar advanced on heedless of the advice of caution given by his companions. He had surprised the enemy which put him in an advantageous position. He gave the 16-year-old Abdur Rahim, son of Bairam Khan the high honour of commanding the centre; his right was under Mir Muhammad, commander-in-chief, and the left under Wazir Khan. He put himself at the head of one hundred picked horsemen to be ready to go to the assistance of the wing which might come under enemy pressure. The river Sabarmati lay between the two armies. Obstacles, howsoever wide or high, only spurred Akbar to conquer them. With four men of his bodyguard, he was the first to plunge his horse into the swollen river; the rest of the army followed. The sight of the Emperor on the opposite bank sent a wave of enthusiasm among the rank and file of the imperial force, and they completed the hazardous crossing without serious losses.

The battle was joined about midday. The fighting was fierce, at times one side and then the other gaining advantage. In the words of Abul Fazl, Akbar "moved like a fierce tiger from one side to the other to give help where it was needed the most." Once his horse was hit, and he promptly changed his mount in the thick of fighting. The enemy launched a series of attacks against him, but he foiled them all with rare adroitness. The Mirzas ultimately gave way under a severe onslaught launched by the Emperor himself; their massive army broke up in panic and fled. Muhammad Hussain was wounded, thrown from his horse, and taken prisoner. To quote Abul Fazl: "Victory now declared itself on every side, and His majesty returned triumphant to his heavily cushioned field throne at the edge of the battle ground and there he offered his

thanks for the victory vouchsafed." His generals and men also bent their knees in prayer, and expressed their gratitude to the Almighty for tilting the balance in their favour. The victory, from all accounts, was narrow, and was due in a large measure to Akbar's valour. At the thanks-giving ritual, the handsome Abdur Rahim stood by the side of the Emperor who at one stage put his hand on the young commander's shoulder, apparently to compliment him on the manner in which he acquitted himself in his first major military assignment. Perhaps Akbar was in a reminiscent mood: seventeen years earlier he, then a boy of fifteen, stood by Bairam Khan at Panipat to return thanks to Allah for victory against the mighty army of Hemu. Akbar considered Abdur Rahim to be his special charge, and he was pleased that the son of the former *atalique* was associated with him in an exciting battle.

When Muhammad Hussain was brought before Akbar and several officers laid claim to the honour of his capture, Raja Birbal asked him who had made him prisoner. To this he tersely replied: "The salt of the land of faith and the world has taken me." Akbar was pleased with this reply, spoke to him kindly and placed him under the special charge of a Rajput, Rai Rai Singh. Among the prisoners was a certain Mard Azmai Shah, foster-brother of the captive Mirza; he had killed Bhupat Rai, brother of Bhagwan Das, at Sarnal. To please his brother-in-law, Bhagwan Das, Akbar did the unusual and rather callous act of spearing Mard himself through the chest as the latter stepped forward to do the customary obeisance. Akbar was in a fierce mood. Barbaric punishments were ordered to be inflicted on the captured enemy, and he topped it all by ordering the erection of a pyramid of human heads—the traditional Tartar way of celebrating the defeat of a tenacious enemy.

After the enormous exertions of the last few days, Akbar was exhausted. He ordered a carpet to be spread on the bank of the river, took off his coat of arms, and lay there to relax in the cool of the evening. Raja Birbal and some other dignitaries were by his side. The serenity and peace of the setting were broken suddenly by a familiar sound in the distance; it seemed as if an army was on the move. Scouts soon came to inform that a sizable force under the command of Ikhtiar-ul-Mulk was approaching the battlefield from Ahmedabad. Akbar immediately jumped on

to his horse, ordered the drummer nearest to him to sound an alert, gathered a couple of hundred cavalrymen around him, and set out with what Abul Fazl calls "the speed of lightning" to meet the challenge. Akbar's attack was opened by his bowmen who "poured a hail of arrows on the enemy." Simultaneously, his small band threw themselves upon the advancing horsemen, and caused among them such panic that "the royal troops pulled the arrows out of the quivers of the enemy and used them against the fleeing Gujaratis." Ikhtiar-ul-Mulk lost both battle and life; his blood-dripping head was brought to Akbar by a Turkoman soldier.

During the engagement, Muhammad Hussain Mirza was put to death by his guard, without express order but under pressure from Raja Bhagwan Das, who apprehended that he might escape and join the enemy. Though Akbar expressed displeasure at the act, he was not sorry to get rid of his most formidable enemy. After this singular victory, Aziz Koka with other officers came from Ahmedabad to the battlefield. The party was warmly welcomed by the Emperor.

It was on 2 September 1573, that Akbar led his victorious army into the capital. The population gave him an enthusiastic welcome. Once again the *khutba* was read in his name, and *firman*s were issued to announce the suppression of the rebellion. After resting for a few days in the palace of his foster-brother, Akbar started on return journey to Sikri. The second expedition to Gujarat had been a 'blitzkreig' that astounded both his friends and foes. He reached Sikri on Monday, 6 October after an absence of drama-packed forty-three days. The rebels had been liquidated; there was now no one left to foment insurrection in the province.

The welcome given him when he entered Sikri was a memorable one. Shouts of Allah-Akbar rent the air as the cavalcade, headed by the gorgeously dressed bodyguard who had their lances adorned with golden apples, entered the gates. The strains of martial music struck by the bands of the imperial forces gave the city an aura of joy. Akbar himself rode his favourite warhorse, a grey charger with henna-dyed mane and tail, and carried his jewel-bedecked spear proudly in the manner of a gallant Greek knight; before him rode his faithful commanders and courtier, all dressed in the shimmering robes of their respective rank. Members of his family and those grandees who had remained in Sikri came out to the



foot of the hill to greet him. The scene was charged with emotion, and not a few in the crowd wept for joy and bent their knees in prayer. It was the first time that Sikri saw a royal procession of this splendour. Akbar too was touched. To commemorate the occasion, he added the prefix Fatehpur—victory city—to the name of the new capital.

As has already been stated, the conquest of Gujarat was a high watermark in Akbar's military career. His feats of personal valour in the two campaigns stand out for the intuitive methodology he brought to bear on his seeming madness. Never thereafter did he expose himself to such dangerous situations as he did at Sarnal, and never again did he display such singlemindedness in liquidating his enemies as he did in battles against the rebellious Mirzas. Gujarat became a pinnacle of Akbar's glory as a warrior and also as a leader who inspired his men with his courage and example. His vigour and thrust were seen at their fiercest in these lightning strikes. Age and experience lent a degree of circumspection to his reaction then onwards.

## Fatehpur-Sikri

It was in 1571 that Akbar ordered the building of a new capital at Sikri—an act of faith and an expression of his gratitude to Sheikh Salim “for the favour of bestowing upon me the priceless gift of two sons.”\* The most talented architects of Hindustan and Persia were commissioned to raise at the site of the obscure village of Sikri a city bigger and prettier than any in the world.

Thousands of workers were employed for the execution of this project, and Akbar took upon himself to inspect periodically the progress of the works. The construction of palaces, gardens, schools, colleges, houses for the grandees of the empire, mosques, playgrounds, libraries, court-rooms, roads, parks, lakes—in fact, every conceivable adjunct of the capital of an expanding empire—was taken in hand simultaneously. A dream-city, described by many foreign visitors as “bigger and better than London” took fourteen years to complete, and it was here that Akbar, an illiterate man of muscle, flowered into a sensitive human being fully conversant with religious and philosophical doctrines bearing on highly abstruse metaphysical questions. In due course, Fatehpur became the cultural centre of Hindustan, and artists, musicians, architects, religious leaders, students, scholars and poets gathered

\*Salim and Murad were born at Sikri while the third son, Daniyal, was born at Ajmer a couple of years later.

here from all parts of Hindustan and Central Asia under the patronage of the Emperor.

The red sandstone buildings that adorned the capital from one end to the other bore testimony not only to the largeness of Akbar's architectural conception, but also to the broad-minded liberalism he brought to bear on the formation of his plans and policies. Fatehpur came to symbolize a magnificent blend of Hindu and Muslim cultural values. For the first time in the long history of Muslim rule in India, mosques and temples were built side by side to stress the equality of all religions. Jodha Bai's Mahal, also known as Jahangir Mahal, was a masterpiece with its combination of Indian and Persian architectures. This was the biggest residential palace in the city, and to this day it stands, though in ruins, as a monument of Akbar's love for the Amber princess and also his faith in the spiritual powers of Sheikh Salim.

The great mosque, designed originally to be a carbon copy of the holy place at Mecca, bears a chronographic inscription recording its completion in May 1572. The magnificent Buland Darwaza, one of the gateways to the mosque, was built to commemorate Akbar's victory in the Deccan, its gigantic size being a measure of the Emperor's high evaluation of the conquest of the southern sultanates. One hundred and thirty feet wide and one hundred and seventy-six feet from the ground level, this memorial is historically important for the following inscription it bears:

*Jesus, son of Mary, on whom be peace, said: The world is a bridge, pass over it, but build no house upon it. He who hopeth for an hour, may hope for eternity. The world is a fleeting moment, spend it in prayer. The rest is an illusion.*

To inscribe a quotation from the writings of Jesus Christ on the main gate of the principal mosque of his capital was undoubtedly a bold and studied device to stress the fundamentals of his faith. Truth and wisdom, according to Akbar, were not the monopoly of any one religion. The flight of forty-two steps that lead to the gate symbolize man's gradual ascent to the realization of the principle of equality. Equally eloquent passages could have been culled from the Quran to express the self-same idea about the transitoriness of life, but Akbar preferred not to. He perhaps meant to emphasize that there are more than one entrance to the

house of God. As has been alleged by some historians, among them Vincent A. Smith, his choice of quotation was no reflection on the principles of Islam; rather, it was a subtle reiteration of the all-comprehensive nature of the tenets of the religion of his birth. Akbar never forsook Islam; he only used a different medium to express his faith in its fundamentals. The inessentials of any religion were of no consequence to him. A robust rationalism helped him to separate chaff from grain.

The entire complex of the mosque with its glorious quadrangle (433 ft  $\times$  366 ft) and the exquisite tombs of Sheikh Salim, his grandson Islam Khan, and many distinguished ladies of the harem is a masterpiece of architecture; it is in a way the reflex of the mind of the great man who built it. The houses of Abul Fazl and Faizi in its proximity lent the complex an aura of intellectuality; it was here that the two celebrated brothers reinterpreted Islam in keeping with the Emperor's dynamism and his disdain for the confusing complexities of traditional conservatism. It was here again that Abul Fazl wrote the narrative that in its phraseology is a dazzling piece of literary art. With the palaces of the Padshah on one side and the houses of God on the other, Faizi drew inspiration from both, and brought to bear a very sensitive mind to evolve a code of values that by and large featured the change that was taking place all around. Their father Shaikh Mubarak, an Arab, was an intellectual giant of radical views; both his sons rose to be the most intimate counsellors of the Emperor: this equation is brought out clearly by the location of their houses at Fatehpur-Sikri.

Akbar's Fatehpur could be divided into two parts, one the stamping ground of the King, his family and courtiers and, the other, the residential area for the comparatively poor and the needy. The latter made up for their indigence with stocks of what Badaouni calls their fear of and faith in God. The two areas interacted; it was not unoften that the Emperor repaired for meditation to the lowly dwelling beside the mosque where Prince Salim was born in 1569. He would sit there for hours holding "silent conversations with the Creator" and trying to find answers to the problems which were agitating his mind. Sheikh Salim died in 1572. Thereafter, Akbar converted the saint's hut virtually into a prayer room, and sought therein the peace of mind which eluded him amidst the luxury of the palaces.

Depression descended upon Akbar often when he was in the glow of wine and women. Tradition has it that once when he was in the dainty and beautifully decorated house of Mariam, his Portuguese wife, Akbar suddenly became pensive, ordered a horse to be brought, and rode away to the solitude of a weatherbeaten wooden hut ten miles from Sikri. He remained there for two days and nights, and returned only when his friend and confidant Raja Birbal went there and humoured him out of his doubts and misgivings.

Another story says that on the day of *Id* in 1583, after the evening meal at the house of Stambuli Begum, a rare beauty from Constantinople, the Emperor cancelled a big nautch at the Jodha Bai palace, disguised himself in the saffron robes of a mendicant, and walked the twenty-three miles to Agra to say his morning prayers at the mosque where the *khutba* was read in his name in 1556. A mixture of contradictions, Akbar defies analysis in clinical terms. On the twentieth anniversary of his coronation, the celebrations were confined to a round of frolic with his favourite wives at *Ankh-Machauli*.<sup>\*</sup> The one who sought him out first received the honour of playing the host to him for the next seven evenings in succession. It might not have been a chance that the game ended in a win for the ageing but still attractive Jodha Bai.

Akbar's Khwabgah—dream-cottage—a song of love in red sandstone and white marble was where the ceremony of the lifting of the veil of every new wife he took was performed—and he took at least one every full moon. The guides in Fatehpur almost proudly stress that no woman—wife, concubine or mistress—shared the Khwabgah with the Emperor twice in her life-time. Jodha Bai was perhaps the only exception. The Padshah often invited her to the seclusion of the pleasure house “for company and a game of chess.”

Away from the palaces and the places of worship, the Khwabgah was built on the model of the Tarab Khanas of the Timurid princes in Herat and Samarkand. In the words of Badaouni, it was “a villa on the shore of solitude” where none but the Emperor could go for relaxation. Once when it became known that in his absence the cottage was used by a foster relative to hold a private celebration, Akbar lost his temper, demoted his kinsman by two ranks,

<sup>\*</sup>A hide-and-seek game.

and had the warden and a housekeeper trampled to death by an enormous male elephant. A mystery surrounded this bower of bliss till the end of Akbar's days; it quickly disintegrated into a resting place for homeless birds and beasts of the jungle afterwards. What would the historian not give to hear the walls of this one-time love-nest speak?

Raja Birbal was perhaps the only courtier whose residence was built within the royal compound; the two-storey house was designed by Akbar himself. Akbar was a vivacious conversationalist, and in Birbal he found a man of wide learning, wider sympathies, and still wider understanding of the affairs of state. He often visited Birbal at odd hours, and remained with him for hours at a stretch. Once when the *darban* announced the arrival of the Emperor well after the midnight-prayer hour, the Raja jumped up from his bed and rushed out to welcome his sovereign. Akbar, suppressing his amusement, reminded Birbal that the dress he was wearing was rather scanty. "It is enough for me, Your Majesty, I have very little to hide." Akbar laughed heartily, went in, and remained with his friend and counsellor till the cocks began to crow. It is believed that it was in the course of discussions that night that the Padshah decided to invite to Sikri a mission of Portuguese Christians from Goa. Birbal often helped Akbar take bold controversial decisions.

For sixteen years, Fatehpur-Sikri remained the centre of the Empire, the capital city to which came people from various walks of life from all parts of the world; its size and grandeur took the foreign traveller by surprise. Ralph Fitch, an Englishman, recorded his impressions of the city in 1585:

Agra and Fatehpur are two very great cities, either of them much greater than London and very populous. Either is a great resort of merchandise from Persia and out of India. The merchandise consists mostly of silk and cloth and of precious stones—rubies, diamonds and pearls. The King keeps a very great court. In Fatehpur and Agra, he keeps one thousand elephants, thirty thousand horses, five thousand war elephants, one thousand four hundred tame deer, eight hundred cheetahs besides a large number of tigers, buffaloes, cocks and hawks. All the way from Agra to Fatehpur there is a market of victuals and other things, as full as though a man were still in a town

and so many people as if a man were still in a market.

Fitch was apparently a casual observer, not a professional historian; he did not assess the architectural virtues of the palaces and gardens he saw, neither did he dwell even cursorily on the reasons which led Akbar to relinquish the city he had built with such love and at such great cost. When Fitch visited Fatehpur, Akbar had already decided to make Lahore his capital.

Some historians suggest that the failure of the city's water-supply system was the reason behind the transfer. This is perhaps not correct. Had he wanted to stay on in Sikri, he could easily have made additional or alternative arrangements for essential conveniences. Nothing ever deterred him from realizing what he genuinely wanted to achieve. The fact seems to be that Akbar was disillusioned. Sheikh Salim no doubt gave him his blessings and he became the father of three sons, but they all caused him much anguish in that "none of them showed promise of burgeoning into a good soldier or a good man." Their preoccupation with sensual pleasures became evident early—and that despite Akbar's efforts to wean them away from what Badauni calls "the path of unrighteousness." A devoted father, Akbar did whatever he could to arouse them to their duties, but in vain. Salim's waywardness jolted him out of his faith in the saint, and he decided to give it all up and take himself away to the distant Punjab. Reasons (for public consumption) for the change were not difficult to find: Muhammad Hakim, his step-brother, was known to harbour plans of invading Punjab from Kabul, and it was therefore an understandable military necessity to strengthen the land of the five rivers by making Lahore the capital.

Akbar left Sikri in 1585 and never lived there again save for a flying visit in 1601. However, it continued to be the residence of the court for three years longer. Akbar's immediate successors never resided at Fatehpur. Muhammad Shah (1719-48) occupied it for a short period, but it failed to regain even a semblance of the glory of the days of Akbar.

Today Sikri is an adjunct of Agra, a mere museum-piece that attracts tourists from all over the world. The spirit of Akbar still seems to live there and give it a mysterious, indefinable aura. While walking in and around the halls and corridors of the

deserted palaces one can see with the mind's eye the glory of by-gone days. The tomb of Sheikh Salim is visited annually by thousands of his devotees, and it is believed that a soulful wish made there for a son is invariably answered. Sikri is a memorial to Akbar; it is also a memorial to the spiritual power of the Sheikh.



## End of Afghan Rule in Bengal

Building an empire extending from sea to sea became a magnificent obsession with Akbar ever since his visit to the port at Cambay. The immensity of the ocean cast a spell on him, and he one day told his top Rajput confidant, Raja Bhagwan Das, in the midst of an animated conversation about war and peace: "The wealth that came to my hand in Ahmedabad did not fascinate me half as much as did the waves of the ocean at Cambay. I was carried away by the sheer bigness of the spectacle. What security will an empire enjoy if it is flanked by the ocean on either side. Mountains can be conquered with ease, but not the sea. My forefathers made light work of the Hindukush and seized Hindustan. My sights are now fixed on the east. The conquest of Bengal is a necessity for the security of our empire."

The Raja concurred. He knew it was of little avail to try to dissuade Akbar from a declared resolve. The Padshah regarded war as a mode of divine worship, a means to the realization of the highest form of dharma by a king. Nearly the whole of north-western and central India was under his sway. Now the east beckoned him.

Ibn-Batuta described Bengal as a hell full of good things. Its incredible wealth and the beauty of its fauna and flora, made it a paradise while its many diseases, its epidemics, its hurricanes, tornados and other recurring natural calamities made it truly infernal.

But Akbar was lured not by the famed riches of the region, but

by the sea that bounded it on one side. An irrepressible urge to win and dominate possessed him. In his scheme of priorities self-assertion came first and the vague generalities like liberation and creation of a unitary state were only convenient arguments to justify the use of the gun to satisfy that basic lust.

An opportunity for him to meddle in the affairs of the eastern provinces was not long in coming. Shah Daud Khan, young, handsome, pleasure-loving, proud and tactless, was out to repudiate the formal allegiance his astute father, Sulaiman Khan Karmani, had always held out to the Mughal Emperor. Sulaiman was to all intents and purposes a pacifist, content to hold on to what Destiny had virtually thrust upon him. Islam Shah Sur appointed him Governor of Bihar after the death of his father, Sher Shah, in 1545. The intrepid Afghan discretely went about the task of consolidating his position, and became the master of Bihar and Bengal before Akbar ascended the throne in 1556. Though his military might was not inconsiderable, he had bought peace by acknowledging Akbar as a suzerain. His calculation was not wrong; the Mughal war machinery was too massive to be contained by the loot-hungry Afghan mercenaries. His passivity suited Akbar. For the first twelve years of his reign, Akbar was involved in a round of wars in Malwa, Rajasthan and Gujarat, and was not in a position to take on the distant eastern provinces. Necessity thus forced Akbar and Sulaiman to accept each other's identity.

Things, however, changed with Sulaiman's death in 1572. His eldest son Bayazid ascended the throne to be murdered shortly thereafter by his cousin and son-in-law Hansu Khan. Thus came the turn of the temperamental, strong-headed younger son of Sulaiman, Daud Khan, to wear the crown and face the selfish schemings of his courtiers and relatives. He stood up to the task bravely and succeeded for a while in averting a threatened free-for-all by his ambitious amirs. To rally the nobility around him, Daud raised the cry of the kingdom in danger, and proceeded to make a show of military strength against the centres of Mughal authority in the region. The fort of Zamania, constructed by Khan-i-Zaman a few years earlier was the first to be invested. Here was a provocation Akbar could not take lying down. His warnings, relayed to Daud through Munim Khan, the imperial Governor at Jaunpur, remained unheeded. The youthful Shah

over-estimated the strength of his horse, elephant and manpower,\* and reckoned that the terrain and distance would deter Akbar from mounting an expedition to the east. The aged Munim Khan took fright, and sent messages to Fatehpur-Sikri for reinforcements. Later, he represented that the sword-rattling by Daud was loud and continual, and that the best way perhaps to check his increasing bellicosity was for the Emperor to come himself. Akbar was only too ready to respond to this call. The hour had come for him to strike and extend the border of his empire to the sea in the east.

A massive expeditionary force was collected post-haste. Abul Fazl lists among its nineteen top-ranking generals Raja Bhagwan Das, Raja Man Singh, Zain Khan Koka, Raja Birbal, Saiyed Abdullah Khan, Rao Madhu Singh, Hakim Amir-ul-Mulk and Shahbaz Khan—all veteran soldiers with admirable records of heroism and faithfulness. Akbar left nothing to chance; he even went on a hurried trip to Ajmer to invoke the blessings of Shaikh Mueen-ud-Din. The feast he gave at the Durgah this time was, to quote Abul Fazl, “a shining manifestation of the light Divine that illumined the heart of the lord of the world.” His prayers were soulful and his munificence boundless.

Back in Sikri, Akbar ordered the construction of a fleet of boats for the oncoming campaign. The sea and the ships he saw at Cambay had perhaps sparked in him an urge to use the available waterways for military purposes. An armada of nearly two hundred boats, some of them multi-storeyed with gardens laid thereon for the ladies of the harem to have their morning and evening walks, took shape within six months. The master of the fleet, Rai Parmanand, a relative of Raja Todar Mal, worked day and night to equip the flotilla with everything that the Emperor and his staff might need on the way; in fact, it was a floating capital complete with halls and audience chambers and places of worship for the king and his courtiers. Two boats were designed to carry Akbar’s favourite elephants Bal Sundar and Suman, and two female elephants for each of them. The people of Agra stood wide-eyed when they saw this collection of “palaces, houses and

\*It was estimated that, besides other units, Daud Khan had under his command forty thousand horses, five thousand elephants and one hundred twenty thousand infantry.

offices on water" ready to transport the Emperor and his entourage to the distant Patna. Some long-time residents of Agra recalled the four boats Humayun built soon after he came to the throne in 1530: "these were mere toys as compared to the full-size craft we see out there," exclaimed Baba Ali Muhammad, a boat-builder of the days when Sher Shah was at the height of his power.

Climatic conditions never deterred Akbar; rather, their adversity spurred him to a greater effort to master nature. It was the beginning of the summer when the generals reported completion of all arrangements. The rains were round the corner. Some felt that the Emperor would defer operations till the weather was more favourable. Akbar, however, gave the get-set signal without a moment's hesitation. The loading started straightaway, and the Padshah, accompanied by the three princes, their mothers and many other ladies of the harem set sail on 5 June 1574. The main army took the land route; it however took care never to lose sight of the flotilla, and kept itself in readiness to meet any emergency.

To start with, the boats bore the look of tourist hotels. Musicians, dancing girls, singers and many other groups of Ahl-i-Murad, assembled on the decks every evening to regale the Emperor and his courtesans with their artistic skills. Abul Fazl records that one evening when a party of *qawals* were rendering a composition in praise of Prophet Muhammad tears came to Akbar's eyes and, not being able to control his emotion, he repaired for a while to his room. He rewarded the singers lavishly and asked them to "feed me on the heady wine of the self-same hymn" every evening.

Akbar's robust and well-boned exterior was a God-given camouflage for a very soft and sensitive heart. Normally tears do not come natural to men of strong build, much less to Emperors engaged in the rough and tumble of the dagger and the sword. Akbar was different. A smile, a song and the mellow beauty of the summer sunset—all these were enough to make him glow in the glory of God. His was a highly strung organism, ready to respond with the hold-back-nothing totality, whatever the circumstances. Fierce and ruthless like a hungry lion on the battlefield, Akbar was as tender-hearted as a dove when in the company of men of the spirit. Often he was seen trying to hold back the

avalanche of tears when confronted with a soft, sombre thought. Seldom was he known to have risen dry-eyed after saying his prayers. Tears were a reflection of something mysterious in his personality, a warmth that made him look more like a saint than a Shah. It was not for nothing that many regarded him as the promised Mahdi, and looked upon him as a spiritual leader as well.

The rains kept their date. The Jamuna and the Ganga burst their banks, and caused many a doubting general to question the wisdom of the timing of the expedition. History supported their pessimism. Humayun's defeats at Chausa and Qanuj reminded them of the havoc the monsoon could play. Akbar alone stood calm and determined. Daud Khan was to be punished and brought to his knees at any cost. High winds and rains slowed down the progress of the flotilla, but these failed to make a dent on the Shahinshah's resolve. Many boats sank in the deluge, but Akbar was firm. Some advised him to forsake the boats and proceed to Patna by land, but in vain. Akbar looked upon nature as a friend, not an enemy. He saw behind the raging turmoil a grand design, a divine purpose that could not but be to his ultimate advantage. Though the loss was heavy, Akbar stuck to his boats. First at Allahabad and then at Benaras he halted for a while to meet and confer with the waiting emissaries from the Khan-i-Khanan. The news from Patna was anything but encouraging. Daud had dug himself behind the safe walls of the fort; efforts to dislodge him had failed. The imperial forces were finding it difficult to maintain the siege in face of heavy rains and swollen rivers. The Afghan artillery further added to their woes. A dispirited Munim Khan felt that victory could be gained with comparative ease if the Emperor himself showed up with large reinforcements. Akbar made light of the aged Khan's pessimism, and thought that the advancing years had affected the general's will to win. He, therefore, decided to send in advance the versatile Raja Todar Mal as his plenipotentiary. The Raja was to assume command if in his opinion the situation warranted that course. Munim was stung by this implied reproof, and launched desperate assaults to dislodge the Afghan king from the citadel, but without result. In the meantime, Akbar sent a special envoy to Daud with a communication that made no secret of his poor assessment of the Afghan strength:

In a few days we shall be at the gates of Patna. Beware of the danger that lies ahead for you and your besieged men. We are resolved to crush all opposition to our arms. However, to save bloodshed, I make an offer that we decide the fate of the territories now under your nominal control through a duel. The choice of weapons is left to you. In case you do not find yourself equal to accepting this generous offer, may I suggest that let the issue be decided by a duel between our chosen proxies. Even if this be not acceptable, I am prepared to stake all on a fight between our two elephants. In making these sporting offers, we are motivated by human considerations, and these alone. Wars, though necessary, are not unavoidable. We hope you will see the writing on the wall, and surrender unconditionally. You may depend upon our generosity for a fair deal to you, your family, your officers and your men.

Daud read in this letter a warning that could not be ignored. He had no chance against Akbar's army which, despite rain and roaring rivers, was closing in on the beleaguered city. But he chose to wait and see, hoping against hope that the Mughal advance might still be checked by the daily worsening weather.

Munim Khan met Akbar a few miles out of Patna, appraised him of the continuing stalemate, and sought instructions for the line of action. The Emperor's reaction was typical: "We shall survey the positions tomorrow morning. Our decision will be made on the spot."

Before reaching Patna, Akbar sent the princes and the ladies to the safety of Jaunpur. Thereafter, he plunged headlong into action, and supervised personally all aspects of the attack he was determined to make. Unmindful of the rain of arrows and bullets from the fort, he went on horseback to inspect the approaches to the city. He was quick to decide that success depended on the speed with which he could capture the township of Hajipur on the opposite bank. A night attack by three thousand soldiers, led by Chalman Beg, accomplished this objective.

The loss of this position unnerved Daud and, to quote Abul Fazl:

...he madly stole away from the wicket of the fort by night and embarked on a swift vessel for Bengal. The elephants and

the army fled by land. Thus was the pride of the host broken, and so great was their panic that the roads and the ditches were strewn with the dying. In their hurry to escape some plunged into the waves, some crowded into boats till they sank with the weight of the numbers; many were trodden down and mingled with the dust, and heads which were onceswollen with arrogance were trampled upon by the lowly foot of the hireling.

It was dark when Akbar came to know of Daud's flight. He instantly mounted an elephant to give him chase, but Munim Khan dissuaded him from undertaking a hazardous pursuit at night. At sunrise, the Emperor entered the city in triumph and, after giving instructions to Munim Khan for deployment of troops at all points of exit, he himself mounted his white charger Mubarak Kadam and went in pursuit of Daud. He swam the Pun-Pun on his horse, and drew rein only after travelling sixty miles at gallop through thick-set bush, swollen ponds, and ditches as deep and wide as mountain gorges. There was no sign of Daud; he had apparently crossed over into the inaccessible regions of Bengal. Akbar gave up the chase, but his resolve to capture the Afghan remained.

Back in Patna, Akbar invested the Khan-i-Khanan and Raja Todar Mal with powers to carry the war to Bengal and Orissa, and take such steps as they deemed necessary to subjugate Daud. After spending a few days at Jaunpur, Akbar himself started on the journey back to Agra. The expedition had been a partial success. The war in the eastern provinces could not have been regarded as won for as long as Daud was at large. Munim Khan was aware of the Emperor's disappointment, and he therefore went full-steam ahead to complete the half-finished task. Tanda,\* the capital of Bengal, was seized virtually without a fight. Once again Daud eluded capture; he slipped away into Orissa a day before Munim entered Tanda. Todar Mal followed the fleeing enemy, but failed to establish contact with Daud's forces. The Raja faced a dilemma; the troops, weary and homesick, were reluctant to march further into the wilderness of a barren and inhospitable countryside. They wanted to go back to the comparati-

\*The traditional capital of Bengal was Gaur. Shah Daud's father, Shah Sulaiman Khan, changed it to Tanda for climatic and military considerations.

vely luxurious life of Bengal. For seven long months they had battled against the fury of nature and man; they could stand the rigours of war no longer. The Raja's persuasive tongue failed to rally them to further action. The thought of a retreat depressed Todar Mal. In desperation, he sent a message to the Khan-i-Khanan for help. Perhaps he could prevail upon the troops to make one last attempt. Munim Khan's response was quick and positive. He belonged to that old brand of Turk faithfuls who placed duty above age; his decision to go himself to buttress up the sagging morale of the Raja's forces sealed Daud's fate. His presence in Orissa gave the troops a new will to fight. The crucial battle took place on 3 March 1575, at the village of Tukoroi. Fortunes fluctuated dramatically before victory came to the Mughals. First, Khan-i-Alam Chalmah Khan fell from his horse and was killed before anybody could come to his rescue; then Khan-i-Khanan, badly wounded in the head, had to flee the field to save himself from what at one time looked certain death. Todar Mal, undaunted by these reverses, then made his famous call—"what harm if Khan-i-Alam is dead; what fear, if the Khan-i-Khanan has run away; the empire is ours." The ferocity of the counter-attack he launched has been described by many historians, but none has done it more lucidly than Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad:

The Raja leapt on the foe like a tiger; his sword flashed like the lightning, killing all those who came within its range; his calls to the troops, in the name of God and Akbar, inspired his followers to perform miracles of valour. He was everywhere—at the centre, right and left. Truly, he fought with life held on the palm of his hand. Never before had a Rajput been seen to carry the Muslim flag with such enthusiasm. Two horses collapsed under him from sheer exhaustion; each time he sprang to his feet, and wielded the sword with unmatched skill to keep the enemy away. When Munim Khan returned, the day had already been won. Shah Daud and his generals found themselves helpless against the frenzied onslaught led by the Raja. They fled to the safety of a nearby ravine. Todar Mal gave chase—an act of daring that panicked Daud Khan into submission. Thus came to an end the battle which be remembered as a mount to the heroism of Raja Todar Mal.



Daud was captured. When brought before the Khan-i-Khanan, the wily Afghan swore allegiance to the Emperor, shed tears of feigned repentance, and requested for an opportunity to serve the "lord of the universe" and give proof of his loyalty. Munim Khan was touched. The defeated Daud was a picture of obedience and docility. In the eyes of the age-worn Khan, he looked honest and well-meaning. Notwithstanding protests by Todar Mal, Munim offered to sign a treaty of peace with Daud. The Raja rebelled, and refused to append his signatures to the document. Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad's account of the incident bears reproduction:

Next day, the Khan-i-Khanan ordered a grand court to be held and all the nobles and attendants to be present in their places in fine array, and the troops drawn up in arms, in front of his tents. Daud came out of the fort attended by his Afghan nobles and officers, and proceeded to the tent of Khan-i-Khanan. When he approached it, the Khan, with great courtesy and respect, rose up and walked halfway down the tent to meet him. When they met, Daud loosened his sword from the belt and, holding it before him, said: 'I am tired of war since it inflicts wounds on worthy men like you,' Khan-i-Khanan took the sword, and handed it to one of his attendants. Then gently taking Daud by his hand, he seated him by his side and made the most kind and fatherly inquiries. Food and drinks and sweets were served, of which the Khan pressed him to partakes.

After the dishes were removed, the terms of peace came under discussion. Daud swore that he would never take any course hostile to the imperial throne. The treaty of peace was drawn up, and the Khan-i-Khanan brought a sword with a jewelled belt of great value out of his stores and presenting it to Daud, said: 'You have now become a subject of the imperial throne and have promised to give it your support. I have, therefore, requested that the country of Orissa may be settled upon you for your support. His Majesty will accept my recommendation. I now gird you afresh with this warlike sword.' Then he bound on the sword with his own hands; and, showing him every courtesy and making him a great variety of gifts, gave him the permission to leave. The court then broke up and the Khan-i-Khanan stood up, ready to leave.

Raja Todar Mal was horrified. He regarded the treaty as a sellout, an unwarranted surrender of the gain of a hard-won victory. He knew that Daud was a crafty pretender, and that he would break his proffered allegiance at the first opportune moment. When his protestations, threats and entreaties met with no acceptance, the hot-tempered warrior wrung his hands, stamped the ground, refused all participation in the treaty and, incensed with anger, returned to court.

Munim Khan paid little heed to the protest; he returned to Gaur\* with the peace treaty in his pocket. Daud's pledge to be loyal, according to him, was rooted in sincerity, and he sent a long despatch to Fatehpur explaining the reasons which led him to befriend the Afghan rather than alienate them by killing Daud or making him a prisoner. Akbar was unhappy; he would have liked the Khan-i-Khanan to listen to the advice of Raja Todar Mal and not enter into an alliance with the rebel. The Emperor agreed with the Raja that Daud's submission was only a subterfuge, a manoeuvre to gain time and rally his forces for a counter-offensive at the first opportune moment. He, however, did not reprimand his one-time tutor. Munim's loyalty to the house of Timur was beyond doubt; for nearly half a century he had served the dynasty with unswerving faithfulness. Both Babar and Humayun owed not a little to the brave Turk for their successes. If he had erred on the side of leniency in dealing with Daud Shah, it was no more than a mistake of judgment. Akbar was prepared to condone his lapse and let him tackle the Bengal affairs in the manner he considered best. The Khan, however, did not live for long to see the result of his miscalculation. A mysterious epidemic was raging in the eastern provinces when Munim returned to Gaur. People were dying in their hundreds every day, but the Khan ignored the requests of his courtiers to move out of the capital. It was not long before he was stricken by the disease; he died after a few days on 18 October 1575.

The passing away of Munim Khan was a signal for the Afghans to raise their heads again. Unrest spread quickly, and the leaderless imperial army was hard put to it to keep the insurgents in

\*Munim Khan had changed the capital from Tanda to Gaur before coming to Orissa to face Shah Daud's challenge.

check. The news of Daud's plans to march into Bengal alarmed Akbar; he recalled Khan-i-Jahan Hussain Quli Khan from Punjab and sent him post haste to take charge of the governership of Bengal. Raja Todar Mal was named the second in command. The choice of Governor was unfortunate as Hussain Quli Khan was a Shi'ite, and the bulk of the army commanders in the east were Chughtais whose hostility to the Qazilbashs—the Red Caps—was rooted in their long history of major and minor wars against the Shahs of Persia. Disunity brought the Mughal war machinery to a point where not only was it not effective, but became positively self-destructive. Daud advanced virtually unchecked to seize strategic places in Orissa and Bengal. The Governor of Bihar, Muzaffar Khan, was ordered to proceed to the assistance of Khan-i-Jahan. As the situation worsened rapidly, the latter requested the Emperor to come himself:

We are alarmed at the pace at which Daud Khan is advancing to capture one place after another. Afghan chieftains have once again gathered round him in the hope of establishing an independent kingdom. What is worse, the morale of army is low; the men are tired and homesick; they are yearning to return to the bracing climate of Agra and Delhi. Your Majesty may, therefore, consider showing up once more the royal standard in the east. In our judgment, this may prove to be an effective way to check the current slidedown towards dismay and disorder.

This communication proved decisive. Akbar collected a massive force, and set out with considerable fanfare on 22 July 1576. He had travelled only a few miles when he was met by a courier sent by Khan-i-Jahan. The excited messenger laid at the Emperor's feet the head of Daud Khan. Here was an anti-climax that induced Akbar to retrace his steps to Fatehpur-Sikri. With Daud out of the way, the imperial army under Muzaffar Khan and Hussain Quli Khan could be depended upon to restore order and peace.

Following his defeat in the battle of Raj Mahal on the bank of the Ganga, Daud was captured hiding in a swamp nearby. As Fate would have it, it fell to Raja Todar Mal to pounce upon him and pin him to the ground. The Raja shouted, "I have you. Now it will be impossible for you to escape." When he was brought,

the Khan-i-Jahan asked Daud: "Where is the treaty you made and the oath you swore?" Unperturbed, Daud replied: "I made that treaty with Khan-i-Khanan; if you will alight, we will have a little friendly talk together and enter upon another treaty". The Khan, fully aware of the Emperor's will lost no time in ordering Daud's execution. The head was sent to Fatehpur-Sikri; the trunk was displayed on a gibbet at Tanda.

Thus came to an end the life of Shah Daud Khan; with him also ended the long line of independent Afghan kings of Bengal. Mughal historians depict Daud as a licentious, fun-loving, irresponsible monarch absorbed wholly in satisfying his ego and animal passions. This assessment is perhaps unmerited. From the record of his defiance of the Mughal Emperor, it may not be wrong to deduce that he was a proud individual not willing to surrender his authority to Agra. His father Sulaiman Khan followed the line of least resistance; he did homage and paid tribute to Akbar to forestall conflict and probable defeat. His son, however, cherished different values. He preferred war to perpetual subjection. Notwithstanding the heavy odds against him, he had the courage to wage a series of running battles against an army which had gained the reputation of being invincible. The treaty of Cuttack was an imposition that he was perhaps justified in renouncing at the earliest opportunity. His nationalism, though narrow, was not an expression of some morbid eccentricity in his character. He considered freedom to be his birthright, and he was determined to safeguard that right whatever the cost. Akbar too was intent upon exercising what he considered was his birthright—the right to conquer and subdue. The latter won and Daud, though defeated, scored many valuable points, not the least important of which was the vindication of the right to be the master of his own destiny. He was not the first in history to lose his head in defence of a conviction.

## House of Worship: A Bold Innovation

The conquest of Bengal, in particular the elimination of Daud Shah, gave Akbar a feeling of security. Both wings of the empire were now protected by the sea—a geographical circumstance that fueled his long-cherished desire to give a new spiritual content to the lives of people under his rule. Territorial conquests satisfied only one part of his complex character; new and novel citadels of knowledge, he felt, needed to be stormed and captured if enduring foundations were to be provided for his expanding kingdom. To that end, he now bent his energies. The experiment was exciting and to ensure its success Akbar gathered around him men of learning from all over the country.

His thirst for knowledge could not be quenched by dialogues with the *ulema* at court. His doubts were deep and of different hues. Religion and philosophy fascinated and intrigued him; failure to find rational answers to baffling questions only intensified his seeking.

His interest in the problems of life and death, of right and wrong, and of the permanent and transitory, was not casual; he had yearned for many years to go beneath the surface and find what he called the gems of reality. The miracle wrought by Sheikh Salim in securing for him from God the gift of three sons perhaps abetted the spiritual turmoil within him. God's ways puzzled him. So did the role of man, and king, in the scheme of nature. Pre-

determination was irrational and free will, though it appealed to the faculty of reasoning, left many mysteries unresolved. Akbar was keen to know the beginning and the end of his own Destiny. Often he would repair to some secluded corner in the jungle and ponder for hours on these and other such imponderables.

His discussions with Sheikhs, Saiyads and Sufis did not assuage his spiritual hunger. On a Friday when he was engaged in exchange of views with the head priest of the Jama Masjid, there came to Akbar the idea of convening a conference of the learned men of the empire; the purpose was to sift evidence for and against the belief that at the turn of the millennium, i.e., one thousand years of the existence of Islam, there would emerge a Mahdi, a religious leader who would recast Islam and reinterpret its tenets in the light of the changing circumstances. A hint had been thrown a couple of years earlier by Sheikh Mubarak, father of Abul Fazl and Faizi, that perhaps Akbar himself was destined to don the robes of the promised Mahdi. This suggestion seemed to have taken root in the Emperor's mind; and gradually it flowered into a conviction that God had chosen him to be both secular and religious head. But doubts still haunted him. He wanted to be certain that he had not fallen a prey to auto-suggestion. To that end, a conference was called.

Accordingly, a conference hall—the House of Worship—was ordered to be built. Here the professors and priests of Islam would meet occasionally and engage themselves in debates on specific issues. It was in February 1575—a month after his return to Fatehpur-Sikri from the eastern provinces—that the construction of the Ibadatkhana started; the site chosen was close to the palace and near the dwelling of Sheikh Salim. The hermitage of the Miyan (Sheikh Abdullah Niazi of Sirhind) was the centre around which a grand edifice went up. The Miyan, a well-known ascetic, was at one time a disciple of Sheikh Salim, but later left for his native Sirhind. The dilapidated hermitage was rebuilt, and on all four sides of it a hall was built for accommodation of invitees. No trace of the building remains, nor is its exact location known. Perhaps religious fanatics razed it to the ground after the death of Akbar; there were many in Delhi and Agra who took strong exception to the Emperor's liberalism; they went to the length of even denying him a burial according to Muslim rites.

The first conference was in the nature of an experiment, a dress

rehearsal for the real things that came later. The invitees were first confined to Muslims of four classes, viz., Sheikhs, Saiyads, Ulema and Amirs. Later the lists were enlarged to include representatives of other religions, viz., Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. The Emperor himself acted as the chairman or moderator. He moved about freely from one sector of the hall to another, conversing with his guests on points discussed or remaining to be debated. Akbar was in his element at these gatherings. Tempers at times rose high, but whatever the provocation the Emperor invariably kept his calm. Not unoften these conferences, which started on Thursday evenings, went on without a break till late hours on Friday. Scribes kept records of the proceedings. Akbar spent hours listening to these records; very often he could point to an omission here or a faulty emphasis there and get the account changed accordingly. His memory was photographic; at times he astounded his guests by repeating verbatim what each one of them had expounded.

The Ibadatkhana was a bold innovation; it gave Akbar a platform to propound the equality of all religions, a subject which became an obsession with him after the conquest of Bengal. His empire now stretched from the Arabian sea to the Bay of Bengal. Consolidation of this vast land was a task which, he reckoned, necessitated a close look at the causes which led to the breakup of kingdoms in the past. Akbar was in search of a formula to unite different segments of his domains into a well-knit, cohesive state. He felt that religious intolerance and economic exploitation were the two social evils whose ill effects could not be overstressed. His approach was revolutionary; the Islamic priesthood and the hereditary jagirdars ranged themselves against him. Akbar was, however, determined to level up the two inequalities which seemed to him to be the most pernicious.

The House of Worship became a regular rendezvous for the political and religious elite. Not by authority and royal persuasion, but by hard logic Akbar convinced a majority of them of the inequities of the past, and obtained their support for the reforms he intended to carry out. The objectors, whose number was considerable, were left alone to wallow in the mud of their own prejudices.

The details of Akbar's New Order would be discussed separately later. Here it only needs to be stated that the concept of the

Ibadatkhana was not new to Islam, Shah Sulaiman, father of Shah Daud, was known to have constructed a prestigious hall at Gaur for conferences of the type Akbar instituted in 1575. Sulaiman was, however, not a reformer; at best, he was a student in search of knowledge for its own sake.



## Pratap's Pride and Patriotism

All autocrats are egoists; Akbar was no exception to this rule. He believed the world was made for him, and he was an architect chosen by God to give it whatever shape he liked. Eight years earlier, in 1568, he had conquered the Rajput citadel of Chitor, but that victory had not meant the subjugation of Rajasthan. The fiercely proud and high-spirited Rana Pratap Singh, who ascended the throne after the death of his father, Rana Uday Singh, in 1572, kept aloft the crimson banner, and proclaimed from his inaccessible hideouts in the Aravallis that the freedom of the house of Bapa Rawal was above conquest:

Fortune has denied me for the time being the usual paraphernalia of a kingdom. I have no forts, no palaces, not even a seat of Government. Yet I am the Rana, a scion of Maharana Sangram Singh. Courage is my patrimony and the will-to-win the weapon with which to fight aggression. Chitor beckons me. I swear by the blood of thousands of brave Rajputs who fell defending it that poverty would not deter me and my followers from waging a war, if need be, for a thousand years, to retake what belongs to us by the right of inheritance. We solemnly pledge ourselves to eschew the use of gold and silver and brocades and satins for as long as we are not the full masters of our land. Is there a Rajput who can bring himself to twirl his moustache while wearing the chains of subjection? Lord Eklinga is my witness. I shall wage a war of attrition till the wrong done to us is righted. Akbar is a

mighty Emperor; to humble him is the mission of my life.

Here was a challenge and a threat that could not but sting Akbar. He virtually foamed in the mouth at the aserbity of the Rana's words. The alleged impudence of Rana was understandable. Akbar had offered to Pratap, through common friends, virtual autonomy if he surrendered, but the Rana was firm in his resolve not to acknowledge Akbar as his superior. Overtures from Fatehpur were turned down by the Rana with what Badaouni calls then "a hostile flourish of his long, powerful arm and a determined shake of his head from the left to right to stress the finality of his decision."

In 1573, Raja Man Singh suffered a rebuff while returning from a campaign in Dungarpur. Man Singh decided to call on Rana Pratap and try to wean him away from the path of independence. Pratap, ever generous and chivalrous, travelled to the Udaisagar lake to receive his uninvited guest. On the bank of the picturesque lake, a feast was arranged for the prince of Amber. The Raja was received with honour by Pratap's son, Amar Singh, and invited with a touching show of courtesy to partake of the lavish meal. The absence of the Rana was not lost upon the astute visitor. Amar's apologia that his father was ill did not carry conviction. The Raja prepared to leave, and told his young host in words at once firm and angry: "Tell the Rana, I can divine the cause of his illness. This lapse is inexcusable. The canons of Rajput hospitality demanded that he should have been here to welcome and serve me." Further pretence was useless. The Rana appeared on the scene, and expressed his regret, but added: "I could not eat with a Rajput who gave his sister to a Turk and sold his honour for the sake of material riches." The insult cut the Raja where it hurt most, and he left the feast untouched save a few grains of rice he offered to Andevi (goddess of food) which he placed inside his turban. As he withdrew in a huff, the Raja observed: "It was for the preservation of your honour that we sacrificed our own, and gave our sisters and our daughters to the Turk; but abide in peril if such be your resolve for this state shall not hold you." Then, while getting ready to mount his horse, he turned to the Rana and said: "If I do not humble your pride, my name is not Man," to which Pratap replied: "I would always be happy to meet you." As the Raja started on his return journey, one of the Rana's less

scrupulous courtiers shouted: "Do not forget to bring along with you your *phupia*."

The report of this insult was not easy for Akbar to swallow. He talked of a war to the finish and, despite his heavy involvements in the east, gave orders for an expeditionary force to be got ready for "singeing the Rana's beard in his own den.... Panipat will be a flower garden when compared to what I will do to Mewar. My patience is exhausted."

The news from Bengal continued to be a mixture of good and bad for the next two years. Akbar's generals dissuaded him from engaging in full-scale wars on two fronts. Reluctantly, he left Pratap alone till Shah Daud and his Afghan mercenaries were out of the way. The dawn of the twenty-first year of his reign saw Akbar ready to pull out the big thorn in his side which was Rana Pratap. The choicest Mughal artillery, cavalry and the elephant corps were placed under the command of Raja Man Singh with instructions to spare no stratagem to corner the Rana into submission. It was the first time that Akbar appointed a Hindu to the supreme command of an expeditionary army—a move apparently aimed at telling Pratap that even his kindred in faith and blood were ranged against him, and that the war against him was not a *Jehad* but only a reaction to his arrogance and unjust pride.

The Emperor's trust in Man Singh, though well-merited, turned out to be a source of discontent among the senior Muslim generals, like Asaf Khan and Ghazi Khan, deputed to serve under him. The imperial army when it marched out from Ajmer to Goganda was a force sadly divided in purpose and loyalties. The Rajput units under Man Singh and his uncle Raja Jagannath Kachwaha were looked upon by the Saiyads and the Badakhshanis as renegades wanting both in zeal and fixity of purpose. Pratap, they felt, was the leader of Hindu resistance to Islam, and as such a focal point of the anti-Turk upsurge among Hindus both inside and outside Rajasthan. Badaouni's narrative of the expedition not only brings out his own religious fanaticism; it also exposes the anti-Hindu bias of the Muslim commanders. When he asked Asaf Khan how to distinguish between friendly and hostile Rajputs on the field, the latter replied: "Never mind, whatever way you shoot it will be a gain for Islam." The historian records, with apparent glee, that thereafter he shot indiscriminately and "Islam's gain mounted rapidly by many a dead Hindu soldier."

The battle of Haldighat,\* fought on 18 June 1576, was an encounter in which, to quote Abul Fazl, "the price of life was low and that of honour high." The clash developed, as the sun travelled from the eastern hills to the sand dunes of the west, into "hair-raising duels between soldier and soldier, general and general, and elephant and elephant." In the initial thrust from across the narrow pass, Rana Pratap carried everything before him. The Mughal formations broke up, and were on the verge of fleeing the battlefield when a rumour spread that Akbar himself had come with reinforcements. This gave a new heart to the battered Chughtai forces, and they returned to engage themselves in what was virtually a second battle. The renewed clash of steel was awesome. And like men, the elephants too performed amazing acts of valour. Both Pratap and Man Singh were in the thick of the fight. Once the immortal Chaitak, on which Pratap rode, planted his forelegs on the head of the tusker which carried Man Singh—a daring act of animal strategy to enable his master to hurl his spear at the Raja from close quarters. The latter ducked inside the howdah, and Pratap lost an opportunity to nail his adversary to death. The spectacle electrified the combatants, the tempo of hand-to-hand fighting spiralled to a new height of daredevilry, the blood of friends mingled with that of the enemy and the battlefield,\*\* again to quote Abul Fazal, "was covered from one end to the other with a red carpet embroidered with a brand of heroism the like of which had not been seen in Hindustan before."

The Mughal soldiers gradually closed in on the valiant Rana. Unmindful of the seven deep cuts on his body, Pratap fought on. The numbers were against him. A loyal chieftain saw the peril, snatched the royal crown from Pratap's head, donned it on his own and galloped away hoping that he would be mistaken for the Rana. The stratagem succeeded; the pressure on Pratap was relieved and, according to Badaouni, "another loyal Rajput seized the reins of his horse and led him out of the whirlpool of death." The brave impersonator was cut to pieces before the Mughals realised that "the bird they wanted to catch had flown away." Three

\*The pass of Haldighat (also called Haldighati) was situated fourteen miles from Goganda.

\*\*The battlefield was later converted into Badshahi Bagh (The king's garden).

horsemen gave chase, but a flying leap over a stream by Chaitak carried the Rana to the safety of the jungle. This was the last good turn the famed "blue horse" did to Pratap and Mewar. Exhausted, the animal fell dead near a cluster of trees on the outskirts of a village populated by Bhils and other tribesmen. Pratap was now alone, weak and disconsolate. The sound of an approaching horse aroused him to the reality of danger; he quickly made ready to fight what he apprehended was a Mughal pursuer. A shout—"Oh, the rider of the blue horse, stop!"—reached his ears. The words and the accent of the caller intrigued him. He narrowed his eyes to look intently in the direction from which the voice came, and his fear turned into assurance when he recognised that the lone rider was no other than his brother Sakka (Shakti Singh). The latter alighted from his horse a little distance away, and then walked up to do him respect, and to hold him in an embrace. The two had not met since Sakka defected in 1572 to the Mughal court in angry protest against the rejection of his claim to the throne.

Sakka was in tears:

Dear brother, when I saw the blue horse galloping away from the battlefield, the blood of Rana Uday Singh Maharaj stirred within me. No longer could I bear the thought of your falling in the hands of the Turk pursuers. I joined the chase, and killed the two Badakhshani horsemen deputed to catch you alive or dead. By the grace of Lord Eklinga, you are now safe, I see the fair Chaitak is no more. He served you gallantly. The like of him never trod the sacred soil of Rajasthan before. My Ankaro is now at your disposal. He is no Chaitak, but he is strong enough to carry you to the safety of the inner recesses of the Aravallis. I have done my duty to you and to our motherland. Farewell.

The brothers stood motionless for a few moments. The past obliterated itself in the intensity of the present. The grandsons of Maharana Sangram Singh basked for a while in the timelessness of pride and patriotism, then gave Chaitak a hurried burial and parted to go their own ways—Pratap to the rough and tumble of a never-ending guerrilla warfare and Shakti to the purposeless ease and passivity of the court at Fatehpur. The two never met again.

It took Man Singh and his generals some time to realize that they had won the day. The ten-hour battle, fought in heat such as in which "the very brains boiled in one's head," left the remnants of the imperial army exhausted. Twelve thousand of the twenty thousand Mughal soldiers lay dead on the narrow battlefield. The lucky survivors took off their armour, and lay listlessly amidst the dead and the dying to regain breath. Fear of a comeback by the Rana haunted the commanders, and they failed to muster a sufficient number of men to go in pursuit of the enemy. Lack of food added to their woes. Disease broke out, and made the confusion worse confounded. Man Singh was in a quandary. Not only did he not enjoy the cooperation of his Muslim commanders; he had also to bow to the will of the officers often. Disunity bred indiscipline, and that in turn led to minor revolts among different sections of the army.

The Raja sent to Fatehpur a report of the victory by the hand of Abdul Qadir Badaouni. Akbar rewarded the messenger with a handful of gold coins\* which he took out from the velvet purse he always kept by his side. Badaouni also presented to the Emperor the famed elephant Ram Prashad which had been captured at Haldighat. Akbar rechristened the animal Pir Prasad, and went riding on it around Fatehpur the same day. He also drove it himself for a couple of miles. At the end of the jaunt, Akbar remarked: "I do not think the Pir is stronger in bone and muscle than either our Gajmukta or Gajraj."

The failure of Man Singh to send a party in pursuit of Pratap was, to Akbar, a lapse unpardonable. He did not hide his dismay, and refused to receive the Raja when the latter sought an audience after his return to the capital. It may not be wrong to presume that the Muslim generals, in particular Asaf Khan, led the Emperor to believe that Man Singh let Pratap escape because of religious and family considerations. However, the Rajput princes soon returned to favour, and he spared himself no effort to live up to the title Farzand (honoured son) he had been given before his appointment as the supreme commander.

Victory invariably bred in Akbar an overpowering awareness of the omnipotence of God. Haldighat, though only a partial victory, was a landmark inasmuch as one of his bitterest and the

\*According to Badaouni, the number of coins he received was ninety-six.

bravest foes had been pushed back and compelled to take refuge in the Aravallis. A majority of the thirty-six outposts of Mewar were now in his hands, and the chances were that the Rana, pressed by adversity, would before long seek peace. The occasion thus warranted a pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif. Akbar went to the holy city in the spring of 1576, and did the rare act of distributing there in alms an amount of money equivalent in value to his weight in precious stones.

Over the years, Akbar had come to believe in all earnestness that the Chishti held a protective umbrella over his head in war and in peace. His faith in the spiritual powers of the saint was child-like. This visit to Ajmer was memorable, it filled him with a great desire to go to Hijaz for pilgrimage. His counsellors advised against it. The time was not opportune for him to leave the shores of Hindustan for any length of time. The military situation was far from settled in the eastern provinces and in Rajasthan; the *umra*, one and all, considered his presence indispensable for security. Akbar gave in reluctantly, and let Gulbadan Begum and some other senior ladies of the family proceed to Mecca in the company of Khwaja Nakshbandi. The latter was appointed Mir-i-Haj, and entrusted with funds estimated at sixteen lakh rupees for expenses. Akbar, however, did a symbolic pilgrimage; he clothed himself in a white cotton sheet, and travelled barefoot for about a mile in the direction of the holy city, performed the prescribed religious ceremonies, and returned to the fort to begin yet another round of alms-giving for nine days at a stretch.

Akbar sent to Pratap through different channels many attractive offers in exchange for surrender. In one he asked the Rana to name his own terms and conditions. The reply was blunt and straightforward:

Independence has no price. Neither has honour. My dedication to freedom is total. The path I have chosen is bristling with hardships, but I am prepared even to go through hell-fire to make resplendent the milk of my mother. Bapa Rawal and Maharana Sangram Singh kept aloft, at great personal risks, the banners of self-respect and human dignity. It will be an unworthy action to let the torch lighted by them be extinguished. No, Mewar will never be put on sale. Our decision is irrevocable. I offer you friendship on equal terms. This is the utmost limit I can go to.

Akbar despaired. He knew he was dealing with a proud man, one who placed family honour above the riches of the world. This realization bred in him a degree of respect for his foe. Nevertheless, the lust for conquest and the lesser lust to have a Mewar princess in his harem would not let him be at peace with himself; he sent many an expedition to subdue the Rana, but without success. First, the fanatic Shahbaz Khan was chosen to achieve what Man Singh had failed to accomplish. He waged a virtual Jihad for four years, but could not make a dent on Pratap's powers of resistance. Mewar lay desolate. The Rana and his family lived often for days on grass-flour and the bark of trees, but the thought of capitulation never entered his head. Never spending more than a couple of days at any one place, they made their elusiveness a popular subject for bards and story-tellers. Pratap became a legend, a mystery warrior riding winged horses and golden chariots above the clouds. According to one song, the gods fed Pratap and his family on fruit gathered from their heavenly orchards and lulled them to sleep at night with fairy music. The people of Mewar, nay, the whole of Rajasthan, watched the unequal struggle with bated breath.

One day, a wild cat snatched away a cake of glassflour from the hand of Pratap's four-year-old son; the latter shrieked, part in fright and part in hunger; the sight distressed the Rana so much that he made up his mind to give up the fight and surrender. Some historians aver that he wrote a letter to Akbar, asking for terms of peace. The Emperor was overjoyed. He flaunted the letter before his courtiers, among whom was the celebrated poet Prithviraj of Bikaner. The latter discounted the communication as a forgery:

Your Majesty, this is a plot, a snare. I have known Pratap since childhood. He is not the one to write a letter like this. He would rather sacrifice his children with his own sword than seek assistance from any quarter. He is too proud a Rajput to seek terms of peace.

Akbar reflected for a while, and then asked the poet to verify somehow the authenticity of the document. Prithviraj wrote to Pratap a letter, and at the same time sent to him secretly a poem in which he lauded his patriotism and hinted that it would be an evil day when the Gold Sun\* is allowed to set. He concluded:

\*The Gold Sun is the insignia of the royal house of Mewar.



It is as impossible for me to believe that Pratap Singh has called Akbar his emperor as to see the sun rising in the west. Tell me, Oh Rana, what is my duty? Should I use my sword on my neck or should I continue to conduct myself with pride? The honour of Rajputs hinges on your decision.

This message in verse reminded Pratap of his mission, and his reply was equally incisive:

Pratap swears by Lord Eklinga that he would always call the Emperor a Turk, and nothing but a Turk, and the sun would continue to rise in the east. You may continue to walk the earth proudly for as long as Pratap's sword dangles on the Mughal head Pratap would consider himself unworthy of the blood of Maharana Sangram Singh if he were to tolerate the spreading of fame of his rival and equal, Akbar. Oh, Prithviraj, your words the have put new life into me. No one can match your skill in the use of phrases that ennoble and uplift.

The fight went on—a hit-and-run affair that ultimately proved to be the despair of Akbar. The tribal people, in particular the Bhils, rallied to a man in support of Pratap. So did the lesser Rajput chieftains. One Bahama Shah, a long-time loyalist, gave away all his wealth to Pratap for war purposes. It was estimated that the money he presented was sufficient to feed five thousand persons for twelve years.

Shahbaz Khan gained some successes, but in the end he had to give up the chase; the Aravallis, with all their narrow passes, defiles, hiding places, beasts of prey, thick jungles, and hordes of Bhil bowmen were not the ideal ground for a big army to operate from. In 1584, Akbar chose Raja Jagannath Katchwaha, uncle of Raja Man Singh, to head a very mobile expeditionary force; he was instructed to block all passes and make it impossible for the Rana to secure supplies from his sympathizers in the plains. The order was too tall to be carried out effectively. The Bhils were relentless; they took a heavy toll of the roving parties of Mughal soldiers. Katchwaha was beaten back with heavy losses. Akbar was at his wits' end; the Pratap story was building up to a saga of unmatched bravery and patriotism. Reports of recapture by the Rana of important forts and townships came thick and fast to Fatehpur. Akbar could not believe that a solitary daredevil could keep the Mughal armies at bay for nearly a decade. Refusing to admit defeat, he

decided to make one last attempt. The young versatile Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, son of Bairam Khan, was appointed Governor of Ajmer and given sweeping powers to mobilize all available striking power. The destruction wrought by Abdur Rahim in Mewar boomeranged on the Mughal army. Scarcity of food brought the Khan's war machinery to a standstill. The Rana's agents made the going still more difficult for the hungry soldiers; they poisoned the wells, ambushed unwary contingents, looted supplies, and set on fire towns and hamlets reported to have given assistance to the invaders. One day, Pratap's son Amar Singh (popularly known as Amma) attacked and captured at night an enemy camp on the bank of the river Bevas; the inmates, a part of the Khan's harem, were brought to Pratap who received the ladies with courtesy, and immediately made arrangements to send them back to the Mughal commander. To Amma he said:

The honour of women is dear to us. On this noble plank is built the edifice of Rajput society. Jauhar is no mere self-immolation; it is a symbol of woman's identification with the Divine spirit. To lay your hand on woman is to denounce the traditions of chivalry we are justly proud of. Never again, my son, should you be guilty of such a lapse.

The incident impressed the Mughal general. When the news reached Akbar, he immediately ordered a ceasefire and issued a proclamation that in future no harm should come to Rajput women at the hands of an imperial soldier. The Rajput pride in chivalry struck a sympathetic chord in his heart; his respect for Pratap increased, and he decided to let the valiant Rana live in peace. The Khan was ordered to retrace his steps to the base camp at Ajmer. Thus came to an end a decade of costly campaigns in Mewar. Pratap's reputation spread throughout Hindustan. He was the only one to have withstood successfully the pressure of the Chughtai armies. The eighty square miles of territory he claimed to be his own became a place of pilgrimage, a 'sanctum sanctorum' hallowed by the blood of brave Rajputs and more heroic Rajputnis. Pratap's comeback was dramatic. Within two years, he recaptured the whole of Mewar except Chitor, Ajmer and Mandalgarh. Akbar was content to hold what he possessed; circumstances perhaps compelled him to make a virtue of necessity. His

eventual coexistence with Pratap was in fact an admission that in the Rana he found a foe worthy of respect and admiration. It was not a momentary emotional upsurge that brought tears to Akbar's eyes when he learned of the death of Pratap in 1597; rather, it was a soulful homage of one great monarch to another.

Pratap died as nobly as he lived. Colonel Tod's\* account of his last moments captures a picture of unique patriotism and love for the motherland:

The last moments of Pratap were an appropriate commentary on his life which he terminated like the Carthenian, swearing his successor to eternal conflict with the enemies of his country's independence.

A powerful sympathy is excited by the picture which is drawn of this last scene. The dying hero is represented in a lowly dwelling, his chiefs—the faithful companions of many a glorious day—waiting around the cottage for the dissolution of their prince. A groan of mental anguish makes Salimbra inquire what afflicted his soul that it could not depart in peace. "It lingers," was the reply, "for some consolatory pledge that my country shall not be abandoned to the Turk," and, with the death pang on him, he related an incident which has guided his estimate of his son's disposition, and led him to fear that for personal ease he would forego the remembrance of his own and his country's wrongs. On the banks of the Pashooda, he told them, he and his son had constructed a few huts to protect them from the inclemency of the rains in the days of their distress. Prince Amma forgot the lowliness of the dwelling, and a projecting bamboo of the roof caught the folds of his turban and dragged it off as he entered. A hasty ejaculation disclosed his annoyance, and Pratap, observing it, formed the opinion that his son would never withstand the hardships to be endured in their cause. "These sheds," said the dying prince "will give place to sumptuous dwellings, thus generating the love of ease; and the independence of Mewar, which we have bled to maintain, will be sacrificed to luxury. And you my chiefs will follow the pernicious example." They pledged themselves and became

\*Colonel Tod's *Annals of Rajasthan*, a scholarly work of great historical value.

guarantees for the prince "by the throne of Bapa Rawal," that they would not permit mansions to be raised till Mewar had recovered her independence; and then the soul of Pratap was satisfied and he expired in peace.

Tod's assessment of Pratap as a warrior also bears reproduction:

Thus closed the life of a Rajput whose memory is even now idolised by every Sisodia. It is worthy of the attention of those who influence the destinies of states in more favoured climes to estimate the intensity of feeling which could enable this prince to mobilise the resources of a small principality against what was at that time one of the most powerful empires of the world whose armies were more numerous and far more efficient than any ever led by the Persian against the liberties of Greece. Had Mewar possessed her Thucydides or her Xenophon, neither the wars of the Polopenesus nor the 'retreat of the ten thousand' would have yielded more diversified incidents for the historic muse than the deeds of this brilliant ruler.

When Akbar died he left behind in cash some six hundred and forty million rupees—an amount equivalent to at least Rs 128,000 million at the current valuation. His territories, stretching from Kabul in the west to Gaur in the east, were fabulously rich in mineral and other resources; his army comprised at a modest estimate 200,000 men, 50,000 horses, 10,000 pieces of heavy and light cannon, 5,000 war elephants and a transport and service corps of comparable dimensions. And, above all, in unity and purposefulness his empire reached a watermark never attained in Hindustan before. It is indeed surprising that with such wealth of material and man-power resources at his command, he was not able to bring six thousand square miles of Mewar under his control.

Akbar was above all a warrior. Never did he miss an opportunity to jump personally into a battle if he felt his presence was needed to win it. It is intriguing that in twenty-five years of intermittent warfare against Pratap, he did not show the royal standard even once on the soil of Mewar. Even to suggest that he lacked the courage to come face to face with the Rana is to show

a complete ignorance of the stuff Akbar was made of. Fear never influenced his decisions. Disregard for life was basic in his character. Some of his fiercest generals were deputed in turn to subjugate Pratap. They all failed. One would have expected Akbar to take the field himself, and try to achieve what others had not succeeded in accomplishing. The only plausible explanation of this apparent act of omission is Akbar's liberalism, his reluctance to personally take part in a war which might give the impression of a jihad, a war to establish Muslim hegemony over the Hindus. It was perhaps for this reason that he chose Man Singh and other Rajput chieftains to lead the first assault; the later expeditions were also commanded partly by Hindu generals. That for nearly twelve years (1585-97) he personally did not draw his sword against one whom the historians describe as his worst foe lends credence to this piece of speculative reasoning. The personality and beauty of Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai were indeed partly responsible for Akbar's religious neutrality. But one is inclined to suspect that her relatives at the court also played some part in keeping the Emperor at a safe distance from Mewar.

Akbar's court, at the time of Pratap's death, was full of Hindu poets. One of them, the celebrated Rai Durse of Rajasthan on hearing the news of Pratap's death wrote out an impassioned verse in his memory.

It was a provocative piece written against the advice of his friends. Durse recited it in the presence of the Emperor. Not a few feared that the poet would be punished for his effrontery. Akbar, however, invited the Rai to sit on his right, and rewarded him with gifts of great value. Akbar was an enigma both to his friends and foes. His illiteracy was a cloak for the intuitive wisdom he brought to bear on understanding men and their motives.

## New Religious Order

Year: 1577; place: village of Bhera on the bank of the river Sutlej; time: just before sunset. The Emperor, along with the eight-year-old prince Salim and a number of high-ranking courtiers in their gold and silver embroidered silken dresses, is seated on his camp-throne inside the thickly-carpeted royal tent. He is waiting for a party of *qawals* from Ajmer to begin their homage to the Khwaja. A battery of lamp-lighters in their luminous red liveries have trooped out after completing their duties. The tent is enveloped in an air of expectancy.

The hymn in praise of the Chishti began on a low note; gradually, the *qawals*, headed by the far-famed Murtaza Ahmad Khan, gathered ecstasy, raised their voices, and started to ascend the steep rise of devotional rapture. Religious fervour arose within Akbar. Normally, in such circumstances, he would let the tide find an outlet through his eyes, but not so this time. He sat listening to the adulation without letting a tear betray the state of his mind. When Murtaza came to "thou art great, and there is not the like of you in heaven and on earth," Akbar could contain himself no longer. The dam burst. He made desperate efforts to hold back the torrent, but in vain. Involuntarily, he bent his head in prayer. A murmur of "Allah, Allah" rose from the courtiers. Slowly, the singers unwound themselves, and descended to the reality of "man, thou art weak, helpless, a mere bubble in the ocean of Divinity." When finally the hymn tapered off to a halt with a slow, rhythmic recounting of the qualities of the Chishti, the

Emperor rose, whispered a word in the ear of Sheikhu Baba, and left saying that the *Mahfil-i-Qawali* should go on as scheduled.

Akbar was in torment. He kept awake the whole night. The guards saw him pacing up and down the bedchamber, at times snatching at his hair and then sitting down on the bed with head clasped firmly between the palms of his hands. Once or twice he was seen kneeling as if in prayer and then rising with a jerk as if to remind himself of the storm of scepticism that had disanchored him. Before the sun arose, he summoned the camp commandant, and ordered the cancellation of the grand hunt that had been organized for the following week. Raja Todar Mal made an attempt to break through the Padshah's self-imposed solitude, but to no purpose. Akbar would see nobody, eat no food, and permit himself no liberty with the wine cup he was so fond of. Even the royal physician was denied access to his quarters. Concern for his health grew, so much so that Hamida Banu Begum rushed to Bhera from Fatehpur to be by the side of her son.

The change that came upon Akbar defied explanation. He ordered that the animals that had been ringed round within an area of fifty square miles should be left alone. Infringements were to be punished with death. When he finally came out of his seclusion, his show of beneficence was unprecedented. The poor of the sleepy, little-known villages near the camp site received handfuls of coins of various denominations. Community kitchens were set up, and for weeks the entire population of the region was fed on Mughal preparations. Meat dishes were, however, not permitted to be served. Akbar himself did not touch animal or bird flesh for the duration of what later came to be known as his soul-searching days. He ordered Todar Mal to fill the picturesque Anupatalao at Fatehpur with copper, silver and gold coins, and await his instructions for use of the wealth. According to Abul Fazl, coins worth seventeen crore rupees (rupees one hundred seven million) were needed to comply with the royal instructions. When Akbar returned to the capital in the beginning of 1578, this entire hoard of money was distributed among the poor. Disbursements, which were spread over forty-one days, were supervised personally by the Emperor. Anupatalao, thereafter, became a synonym for Mughal generosity.

It was not the first time that Akbar passed through what many historians have called a crisis of the spirit. In 1557, at the age of

fifteen, he took to the jungle and, but for his horse Hairan, he might have lost his life. As at Bhera, his return to the earth then was marked by a mood chaste and benevolent. Some historians, like Abul Fazl, aver that on both occasions Akbar received enlightenment, and a new direction and purpose in life. One tends to agree with Abdul Qadir Badaouni that God alone knew the real reason for Akbar's detours to spiritual spheres. Badaouni was present at Bhera, and his account of the cancellation of the hunt bears the look of authenticity:

And when it had almost come about that the two sides of the Kamargha (hunting ground) were come together, suddenly all at once a strange state and strong frenzy came upon the Emperor, and an extraordinary change was manifested in his manner, to such an extent as cannot be accounted for. And every one attributed it to some cause or other; but God alone knoweth secrets. And at that time he ordered the hunting to be abandoned. And at the foot of a tree which was then in fruit he distributed much gold to the fakirs and poor, and laid the foundation of a lofty building and an extensive garden in that place. And he cut off the hair of his head, and most of his courtiers followed his example. And when news of this spread in the eastern part of India, strange rumours and wonderful lies became current in the mouths of the common people, and some insurrections took place among the ryots (peasantry), but these were quickly quelled.

While he was at Bhera, the imperial Begam (Akbar's mother) arrived from the capital. Her purpose, presumably, was to watch over her son's health.

Abul Fazl, however, had no doubt that "the gates of the world of spirit were suddenly opened to His Majesty," and that he became an enlightened one. According to him, Bhera was to Akbar what Sarnath was to Buddha—a place chosen by God to show light to the blessed one.

Whatever the explanation, the chroniclers are united that Akbar was never the same monarch again. He quickly got back to Fatehpur. Debates in the Ibadatkhana gained in frequency and in depth. The Shaikhs, Saiyads, Amirs and Ulema failed to find for him the Truth he was seeking; their vehement assertions and counter-asser-



tions left him cold and groping in the everthickening layers of darkness. Reason was his yardstick, and any claim that could not be measured by this gauge was discarded by him as irrelevant. The externals of Islam, or for that matter of any religion, were to him not rooted in reason, but in man's fear of death and what came thereafter. Hence he rejected them as unacceptable. The self-righteousness in argument and arrogance of the disputants convinced him of their unfitness to be religious leaders. Though hurt greatly by their indiscretions, Akbar never lost his temper. He invariably sought to pacify passions, and urged upon the spokesmen of factions to use their brains rather than bricks to demolish the offending expostulations. His exhortations proved of little avail.

Frustrated, Akbar decided to enlarge the area of his inquiry. First the Shi'ite and then Hindu, Jain, Christian and Zoroastrian divines were invited to participate in the debates. He was desperately in search of formulae which could ensure and advance the maximum good of the largest number of his subjects. The empire was expanding rapidly and unless, he felt, some unifying principles were evolved the task of consolidation would be impossible. The lessons of history were too patent to be ignored. Muslim rulers had held sway over Delhi for the last nearly eight centuries, but none of them was able to weld the people into a nation. Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji played for a while with the idea of taking into his hands the reins of religious leadership, but he was dissuaded by the faithful Ata-ul-Mulk\* from meddling in matters of religion. The Sultan's plan was to deploy the sword for liquidating the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and then to coerce people into accepting him as a Messiah. Akbar was perhaps the first monarch in the long history of Hindustan to realize that ideological concepts could not be forced down the throats of a people by the sword. Persuasion was a different matter.

Plans for the future were gradually evolving in Akbar's mind. As a first step, he decided to cut the ground from under the feet of professional Mullas, and acquire for himself the powers of legislation in religious matters. For too long, Akbar thought, had the priestly class fattened itself on the ignorance and credulity of the poor. Their vested interests, he felt, were a threat to the solidarity

\*Ata-ul-Mulk was the Kotwal of Delhi in the beginning of the second half of the rule of Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji.

of the Kingdom. Akbar's decision to defuse them once and for all was rooted in the compulsive ambition to transform his domains into a secular state where people belonging to different religions would be able to live side by side with honour and dignity. In the context of the sixteenth century, this was a revolutionary concept, one that could not but arouse hostility and criticism among a section of the population. The risk involved could have deterred a lesser man, but Akbar remained undaunted. On Friday, 26 June 1579, he mounted the pulpit of the main mosque at Fatehpur, and fired what may be called the crucial first shot. In taking upon himself the duties of the Imam, he in fact declared himself to be a King and also a Pope at the same time. The *khutba* he read to an audience representing the elite of the Empire had been prepared by Abul Faiz Faizi. In part, it stated:

In the name of Him who gave us sovereignty,  
 who gave us a wise heart and a strong arm,  
 who guided us in equity and justice,  
 who put away from our heart aught but equity;  
 his praise is beyond the range of our thoughts,  
 exalted be His Majesty, Allah-Hu-Akbar.

Several eye-brows rose at the implication of the last line. The Mullas wondered if the God-King concept of the Hindus had inspired the unusual pronouncement. There was, however, nothing they could do to keep the Emperor out of their preserve. For a while they sulked and whimpered, but in the end considered it expedient to lie low while Akbar was riding high on a wave of self-confidence in this newly-acquired status.

There was no going back for Akbar. His resolution to divest the Mujahids of their traditional rights gained strength as the two most influential exponents of Muslim law—Makhdum-ul-Mulk\* and Sheikh Abdul Nabi—continued to engage themselves in bitter controversies both in and outside the House of Worship. Akbar's disenchantment was total. Unmindful of the consequences, he decided to don the mantle of Imam-i-Adil (the just Imam) which

\*Makhdum-ul-Mulk was a title given by Akbar to Abdullah Ansari of Sultanpur. Humayun had raised him to the rank of Sheikh-ul-Islam. Ansari became one of the bitterest foes of Sheikh Mubarak.

status gave him precedence over the tribe of traditional law-givers; he thus acquired the authority to arbitrate on disputed religious issues provided his ruling was supported by a verse from the Quran. The decree, which was drafted by Sheikh Mubarak\* was signed by Sadr-i-Jahan (Chief Justice) Abdul Nabi and his representatives in the states. The Mullas, headed by Makhdum-ul-Mulk, also lent their support to the measure. It is evident that the latter appended their signatures to what Badaouni calls their own death-warrant out of fear and also from a conviction that the decree would die a natural death before long. The weight of popular sentiment and tradition, they reckoned, was on their side. In a letter to Mulla Tanvir, head priest of the royal mosque at Patna, Makhdum-ul-Mulk said:

The Emperor would soon find his position untenable. The history of Islam is against him. Kings cannot be Imams. It is impossible to wear the crown and the simple white robes of a preacher at the same time. The dual role assumed by the Padshah bristles with contradictions. The heretic Sheikh Mubarak has led His Majesty away from the path of traditional Islamic practices. The spell he has cast upon the Emperor will be broken by the inexorable impact of reality. Illegalities cannot be perpetuated. I have agreed to sign the document for reasons of expediency. Allah is my witness. I am not deviating from the law of the Prophet. Sometimes it becomes necessary to compromise, and even surrender, in the larger interests of the values we all hold dear.

Makhdum-ul-Mulk little knew that his communication would be intercepted and prove to be a valid reason for Akbar to sentence him to death. Abdul Nabi too did not live long after the decree was passed. Akbar could tolerate differences of opinion, but not disloyalty. He did not become Imam-i-Adil to invite ridicule on himself as a King.

Debates in the Ibadatkhana now became more restrained. Akbar and his personal adviser, Abul Fazl, set the tune; they in-

\*Sheikh Mubarak, father of Abul Faiz Faizi and Abul Fazl, traced his descent from an Arab darvesh of Yemen. He was a resident of Nagor, a small town to the north-west of Ajmer. Abul Faiz was born at Nagor in 1547 and Abul Fazl on 14 January 1551.

sisted upon a mathematical approach to problems taken up for discussion. When once a Mulla asserted that every child was born with an instinctive bias in favour of Islamic principles, Akbar's reaction was typical:

Well, let us put this claim to test. We shall place twenty new-born babies in the charge of a nurse. For a year no one will be permitted to meet or talk to them. At the end of that period we shall examine them, and see if they are prone to emit sounds even remotely suggestive of Muhammad or any other champion of Islam.

The experiment was duly carried out. All the one-year olds were found to be dumb when their period of segregation came to an end. This was perhaps the first and only instance of scientific inquiry into human behaviour in medieval times.

The first Jesuit mission from Goa, headed by Ridolfo Aquaviva, came to Fatehpur at Akbar's invitation early in 1579. The other two members of the mission were Antonio Monserrate and Francisco Enriquez. The last-named, a convert from Islam, acted as the interpreter. The royal invitation, sent to the "Chief Priest of the Order of St. Paul" by the hand of a high-ranking courtier Muhammad Abdullah, reflects abundantly the Emperor's desire to seek knowledge from wherever it was available:

Be it known that I am a great friend of yours. I have sent to you Muhammad Abdullah, my ambassador, in order to invite you to send back to me with him two of your learned men, who should bring the books of the law, and above all the Gospels, because I truly and earnestly desire to understand their perfection, and with great urgency I again demand that they should come with my Ambassador aforesaid, and bring their books. From their coming I shall obtain the utmost consolation; they will be dear to me, and I shall receive them with every possible honour.

As soon as I shall have become well instructed in the law, and shall have comprehended its perfection, they will be able, if willing, to return at their pleasure, and I shall send them back with great honours, and appropriate rewards. Let them not fear me in the least, for I receive them under my pledge of good

faith and assure them concerning myself.

The priests could not wish for a better opportunity to spread the Gospel in Hindustan. Political advantages of acceptance of the invitation were also taken into account. The selection of Aquaviva\* for leadership was an indication of the importance the Portuguese placed on the work of the mission; he was young, scholarly, dedicated and one whose ambition was to court martyrdom in the cause of Christianity.

The mission reached Fatehpur in March 1579, following forty-three days' hazardous journey from Goa. The reception Akbar gave them was warm and fully in keeping with their status as representatives of a foreign power. Residential accommodation for the three was found within the palace compound itself. Permission was given them to build a chapel of their own, and to carry on their religious practices without fear. For weeks Akbar met them nearly every day in the hall of private audience. The portraits of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary, presented to him by Aquaviva, were received with a touching show of reverence. The missionaries also presented to the Emperor a copy of the Bible which originally belonged to the kings of Portugal. Akbar placed the holy book on his head, kissed it with the humility of a searcher after knowledge, and ordered the premier artist of his court, the famed Abdul Samad Khan\*\* to get copies of the text made for distribution among the *ulema*.

The missionaries were elated at their initial success. Conversion of Akbar, whom Monserrate described as the greatest living monarch in the world, to Christianity looked to them imminent. Their despatches to Goa spoke of Akbar's disillusionment with the religion of his birth, and gave highly exaggerated accounts of the "disrespect in which Islam is held at the court." Wishful thinking could not have been instrumental in the invention of greater falsehoods than did Aquaviva and his deputy Monserrate. They

\*Father Ridolfo Aquaviva was younger son of the Duke of Atri, one of the most influential dignitaries in the Kingdom of Naples. He was born in 1550.

\*\*Khwaja Abdul Samad of Shiraz, an artist of rare talents, was known as Shirin Kalam. A boyhood friend of Humayun, he was appointed Master of the Mint by Akbar following his return from Rajputana in 1576.

mistook Akbar's courtesy to be a submission, and his liberalism an unquestioned acceptance of the Gospel. This was, however, far from the truth. Akbar respected all religions, and despised none. It may perhaps be correct to say that he was deeply religious without having a religion. Unverifiable parts of religious dogma were anathema to him. The essence of all religions, in his reckoning was the same. The externals differed, and to these he could not be more indifferent.

Akbar invited Aquaviva time and again to give rational explanations of the dogma that intrigued him.\* They failed to satisfy his curiosity. Their despair is amply reflected in their writings. The missionaries perhaps played their cards injudiciously. Their anti-Islam outbursts at times were so vehement that Akbar had to intervene and ask them to respect others as they would like others to respect them. They, however, continued to flaunt their fanaticism, and paid the penalty of not achieving results of any far-reaching consequence. With a greater flexibility they could have perhaps attained better dividends—not in terms of conversations but in terms of spreading a greater appreciation of the ethical and spiritual content of Christianity.

Aquaviva's outspoken comment at one stage drew a challenge from a Muslim exponent of the *Shariat* :

Well, if you have faith let us decide the issue by a walk through a blaze of fire. You will carry the Bible in your hand, and I shall trust my fate to the Quran. Whosoever comes out unscathed will be the winner. Allah is my witness. I am prepared to die for my faith in the Prophet.

Aquaviva considered the challenge un-Christian and refused to accept it. Badaouni avers that Akbar wanted Aquaviva not to turn down the offer "as he would arrange that no harm would come to him." According to the chronicler, Akbar hated the Mulla for his fanaticism, and wanted him to perish in the fire.

Despite their wordy indiscretions, the missionaries came to enjoy respect for their integrity and intellectual robustness, so much so that Akbar entrusted the education of his second son Murad to

\*The concept of the Trinity mystified Akbar; also he could not bring himself to believe that God had a son who become a man.

the care of Monserrate. The latter initiated the prince in the study of the Portuguese language, and freely tutored him in the elements of the Christian faith. The fanatic Badaouni is unsparing in his criticism of Akbar for this "trust in a heathen," and enumerates many an act of alleged vilification of Islam committed by Monserrate in the performance of his tutorial duties. In the writings of Badaouni, fanaticism reached a new peak; none of his observations can be taken without a pinch of salt. Akbar was a liberal—perhaps to a fault—in word and in deed. His sole purpose in entrusting the education of his son to a Christian missionary was to underline that in his eyes all religions were equal; and that a Christian teacher was as good, or as bad, as a Muslim preceptor. There were few in the sixteenth century who could understand and correctly appreciate Akbar's views; he was ahead of his times by at least three hundred years.

A second Jesuit mission, headed by Edward Leiton, came to Lahore in 1591. Jerome Xavier led another three-man mission to Akbar's Court a few years later. Unlike Aquaviva, they pitched their sights lower, and restricted themselves by and large to social welfare activities. Poverty, they realized, was their best ally.

The years 1579-81 were a period of search in Akbar's life. He invited to Fatehpur the leaders of Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Buddhism, conversed with them freely on the essentials of their respective creeds, accepted such theories and practices as he considered useful, and rejected the rest with the politeness of a diplomat well-versed in the art of saying no with a yes.

The parsee priest, Dastur Meharji Rana, from Gujarat, made a strong impact on Akbar's mind for his piety and scholarship. The cult of fire-worship was of a piece with the ceremonial of the *yagya* which the Rajput ladies of the *zenana* often practised in the presence of the Padshah. The sun thus came to occupy a very high place in Akbar's scheme of beneficent agents of God; he prostrated every morning in his worship. He also ordered that a fire-flame should be kept burning at a specified place in the royal fort all twenty-four hours. The supervision of what came to be known as "the perpetual flame" was entrusted to no other than Abul Fazl. The practice of everybody present standing up in reverence when the lamps were lit in the evening became a regular ceremonial at Akbar's court. Several other Parsee customs, including the wearing of the sacred shirt and girdle, were adopted by the Emperor and

the like-minded nobility. The fourteen festivals of Persia also came to be celebrated with a show of considerable enthusiasm.

The easy-to-understand enunciations of Meharji brought into full play the innate pro-Persia proclivities of Akbar. Meharji died in 1591. Thereafter, his son came to the court more than once. His abilities were, however, limited. According to Abul Fazl, he lacked the vision and warmth of his father. Nevertheless, the Emperor treated him with kindness and respect; a heritable jagir of two hundred *bighas* of land was given to him for maintenance.

Hindu theories of the karma and transmigration of soul fascinated Akbar. The two Brahmin priests, Purshottam Das and Devi Prasad explained to him at length the mysteries of the soul and life after death as enunciated in the Vedas and the Upanishads; they worked hard, so much so that Devi Prasad had often to be pulled up the wall on a charpoy to the side of the balcony where the Emperor slept at night in the summer; there, perched precariously, he would continue his explanations till the Emperor dozed off for a couple of hours' sleep. One night, a violent dust-storm hit Fatehpur all of a sudden, the priest's cot swung alarmingly in mid-air and Akbar, sensing danger, pulled up the half-naked Brahmin to the balcony. The ladies and their attendants, dressed exotically in the finest muslins from Gujarat and Bengal, scampered quickly away to their quarters. Akbar and Devi Prasad stayed on at the balcony till the rain came; then they repaired to the library and kept on examining God and His manifestations from different angles for the remaining part of the night. It was not unoften that Akbar went without sleep when engaged in the exciting exercise of probing the heavens and the earth for answers to problems that aroused his curiosity.

The Hindu religious ceremonies caught his fancy; on festival days like Dussehra, Diwali and Raksha-Bandhan he would appear in public wearing the sacred thread and bedecked with *tilaks* of varied colours on his forehead. When his mother died in 1604, he shaved off the hair of his head and participated in the traditional *yagya* ceremonies to bring solace to the soul of the deceased.

Before he was twenty, Akbar had abolished the practice of enslaving prisoners-of war and converting them to Islam. *Jizya* was not only lawful but sacrosanct in the eyes of Muslim divines. Akbar saw the inequity of this levy, and abrogated it in 1564



throughout his dominions. Similarly, the tax on Hindu pilgrims at Muttra and other holy places was done away with in 1563. The practice of sati grieved Akbar and he decreed that Hindu widows should in no case be forced to court death on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Voluntary self-immolation was permitted, but that too only after all persuasions to the contrary had failed. Once he rushed fifty miles to save Raja Jaimal's wife from the ordeal that awaited her following the death of her husband. She was the daughter of Rana Uday Singh, and was known throughout Hindustan for her beauty and intelligence. According to Abul Fazl, "the saviour of humanity extended to the high Rani the honour of giving her a place in his harem."

Beautiful women, of any religion or nationality, were to Akbar "the gifts of God to be preserved and he thankful for." Later, he changed his views in life. In a saying, said to have been spoken at what turned out to be his death-bed, Akbar equated beautiful women with alcoholism and gambling, and warned all men, especially kings, against falling into their trap. At 38, he thought differently. One of the most shapely and graceful Rajput Princesses at the court was chosen by him to be the first wife of his eldest son Prince Salim. She was Man Bai, daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das and sister by adoption of Raja Man Singh. Salim gave her the name Shah Begum, and lived happily with her till another beautiful woman came between them, and led her to commit suicide by taking a lethal dose of poison. Their son Khusrau lived to play a minor role in the drama of succession that stirred the court while Akbar was still alive.

The Hindu strain in Akbar's character became so pronounced that many believed that he was a reincarnation of some Hindu saint or god. A folk-song of Oudh describes him as a Hindu holy-man in his previous birth. It says:

The atrocities of Muslim rulers against their Hindu subjects galled him. He was pious and learned. People respected him for his courage and wisdom. His name was Mukand Brahamchari. He yearned for liberation from the Muslim yoke. His trust in God being firm, he staged a *yagya* to invoke Him that he be born a Kshatriya warrior in the next life. His wish was granted, but only partially. A mistake in the ceremonial of the *yagya* led to his being born a Muslim King. He is Akbar Padshah, the

kind-hearted monarch who looks after Hindus and Muslims with equal love. He is a rishi, a holy man who looks upon his subjects with the eye of impartiality. Akbar is great. Let us praise him with our heart and soul.

One legend gives rise to another. The adulations of his subjects virtually hypnotized Akbar into believing that God wanted him to protect all religions. To that end, he bent his energies without flagging. Bards and storytellers found in him a subject fit for their encomiums. His fame spread rapidly.

The Jain teachers Hiravijaya Suri, Vijayasewa Suri and Bahuchandra Upadhyaya deployed their messages of love and nonviolence to quell what little of the Tartar was still left in the Emperor's anatomy. He gave up meat-eating, banned hunting, ordered the release of prisoners and caged birds, prohibited slaughter of animals, earmarked days on which consumption of meats in any form was totally prohibited, and prescribed drastic punishments for breach of his orders. Akbar was now a changed man. Here was a break with the past that looked like a change in Akbar's religion. Nothing of the sort; his belief in the oneness of God was unshakable. Those who accused him of having abandoned the religion of his birth were apparently carried away by his rejection of the externals of Islam.

After the Kabul campaign in 1582, Akbar felt himself strong enough to institute a new, revolutionary order. A Council of the learned men of the Empire was called to obtain their approval for the introduction of *Tawheed-i-Illahi*—divine monotheism—which was an order based on the synthesis of what Akbar considered the good points of all religions. It, however, needs to be stressed that the cardinal principle of Islam—God is one, and besides that God there is no other God—was the hub around which the *Din-i-Illahi* revolved. Political motivation of the resolution that was put for approval before the Council was obvious:

For an empire ruled by one head it was a bad thing to have the members divided among themselves and at variance one with the other. There is discord between the many kinds of (religious) laws observed in the Mughal territory, some being not only different from, but hostile to others; whence it comes about that there are as many factions as there are religions.

We ought, therefore, to bring them all into one, but in such fashion that they should be both one and all, with the great advantage of not losing what is good in any one religion, while gaining whatever is better in another. In that way, honour would be rendered to God, peace would be given to the peoples, and security to the empire.

Now, let those who are present express their considered opinion, because he would not move until they have spoken.

The assemblage approved the resolution with one voice. The political advantages of the new Order could not be ignored. Few apprehended that a new religion was being imposed upon them. To bring about unity in diversity was Akbar's aim. And he genuinely believed that nobody was better equipped than he himself to bring about the desired transformation. The task, he felt, would be easy once the religious differences were out of the way. The high aim of the measure was too patent to be questioned. Akbar did not spell out to the Council either the essentials or the externals of his plan; he apparently put his trust in the law of evolution, and hoped that the *Din-i-Ilahi* would gather content as it progressed. He restricted himself to merely defining the broad aim; the means could be worked out after the authority was duly invested in him.

Armed with the approval of the intellectual elite, Akbar sent Sheikh Mubarak to explain to the people the nature of the reform contemplated, and to seek their cooperation in its implementation. The response, it seems, was half-hearted. Traditionally conservative, the people—both Muslims and Hindus—were reluctant to jump on Akbar's bandwagon and make what looked like a break with the past. The Mullas and the Pundits read in the reform a move to oust them from what they considered to be their domain. Their opposition was understandable, and it goes to Akbar's credit that he gave the people complete freedom to make their choice. At no stage was coercion used to win supporters. It is likely that some of those who came to the fold of the new order did so with the prime motive of gaining the Emperor's favour. Badaouni calls them "self-seeking opportunists ready to sell their faith for the tinsel of material gain." He may be right in his criticism but the blame in no way falls upon Akbar. The Emperor offered no bribes and made no promises of reward. Had he done so, the list of the

court dignitaries who embraced the new faith would have been much larger than given by Abul Fazl. Of the nearly five hundred courtiers of the front rank, only eighteen chose to enter what Faizi calls "the new K'aaba built by Akbar with stones from Sinai and other holy places." They were: Abul Fazl, Abul Faiz Faizi, Sheikh Mubarak, Ja'far Beg Acaf Khan, Qasim-i-Kahi (a poet), Abdul Samad (poet and painter) Aziz Khan Koka, Mulla Shah Muhammed (a historian), Sufi Ahmad Qadr Jahan (a lawyer) had his two sons, Mir Sharif of A'mul, Sultan Khwajah, Mirza Jani Taqi of Shustar (a poet), Shaikhzadah Gosalah of Benaras, and Raja Birbal.

The composition of the list is significant. Except for Raja Birbal, all are Muslims. Top-ranking commanders and administrators did not align themselves with the experiment. Even the adult members of the royal family did not opt for membership of the new ecclesiastic club. Rajas Bhagwan Das and Man Singh are known to have openly expressed their unwillingness to worship "new and unknown idols." One day when Akbar brought up discreetly the subject of "discipleship" Raja Man Singh replied: "If discipleship means willingness to sacrifice one's life, I have already carried my life in my hand: what need is there of further proof? If, however, the term has another meaning, the Emperor may graciously put me wiser." Akbar reflected for a while, and did not pursue the subject further. Coercion in matters of faith was anathema to Akbar. No wonder the followers of *Din-i-Illahi* never exceeded a few thousand.

Akbar, however, erred grievously in prescribing a ritual of initiation\* that gave the appearance of entry into a new faith. Writes Abul Fazl:

When a novice bears on his forehead the sign of earnestness of purpose, and he be daily inquiring more and more. His Majesty accepts him, and admits him on a Sunday when the world-illuminating sun is in its highest splendour.

At the above-mentioned time of everlasting auspiciousness, the novice with his turban in his hands, puts his head on the feet of His Majesty. His Majesty then stretches out the hand of

\*These details are given by Abul Fazl; hence they cannot be regarded as fabrications of Akbar's detractors.

favour, raises up the suppliant, and replaces the turban on his head.

His Majesty then gives the novice the *Shast*,\* upon which is engraved "the Great Name" and His Majesty's symbolic motto, "Allah-hu-Akbar."

To a Muslim, prostration before a human being is a sin; hence there rose a cry that Akbar was assuming to himself the role of the Prophet, and that the new order was a profanity that ran counter to the injuncts of Islam. The Mullas also insisted that "Allah-Hu-Akbar" inscribed on the *Shast* meant Allah is Akbar and not Allah is great as commonly understood by Muslims. The controversy spread to all parts of the Kingdom and, despite the explanations issued from time to time by Abul Fazl and Faizi—the two arch-priests of *Din-i-Illahi*—the belief gained ground that Akbar was out to subvert Islam. The Emperor did not relent, and made no move to change the ceremonial. This apathy lent credence to the charge, and was perhaps responsible for rejection of the innovation by the masses.

The ceremonial of initiation, as laid down by Akbar, bears a marked resemblance to the ritual with which Hindu novices are accepted as *chelas* by their gurus. It may, therefore, be not wrong to assume that the externals of *Din-i-Illahi* were patterned on Hindu religious practices, Akbar was in search of a house of God in which everybody could enter without compunction, say his prayers, and work for self-realization. It is clear that he intended to instal himself as Sultan-i-Adil, and became the supreme arbiter of disputations among various sections of the Islamic brotherhood. This was far from donning the robes of the Prophet; he became an infallible arbiter within the framework of Islam, not outside it. His pilgrimages to Ajmer and the reverence with which he received the sacred relics of Islam from Mecca give a lie to malicious allegations by his detractors. The text of the resolution passed by the *ulema*, appointing Akbar as Imam-ul-Iman is a document of great significance:

\*The *Shast* was a metal disc, bearing on one side the name of Akbar and the Islamic *kalma* Allah-hu-Akbar on the other. The disciples were expected to keep this disc inside their turban.

Whereas Hindustan is now become the centre of security and peace, and the land of justice and beneficence, a large number of people, especially learned men and lawyers, have immigrated and chosen this country for their home.

Now we, the principal *ulama* who are not only well-versed in the several departments of the Law and in the principles of jurisprudence, and well acquainted with the edicts which rest on reason or testimony, but are also known for our piety and honest intentions, have duly considered the deep meaning, first, of the verse of the Quran.

‘Obey God, and obey the Prophet, and those who have authority among you’; and, secondly, of the genuine tradition.

‘Surely the man who is dearest to God on the day of judgment is the Imam-i-Adil; whosoever obeys the Amir, obeys Thee; and whosoever rebels against him, rebels against thee’;

And, secondly, of several other proofs based on reasoning or testimony: and we have agreed that the rank of Sultan-i-Adil is higher in the eyes of God than the rank of a Mujtahid.

Further, we declare that the King of Islam, Amir of the Faithful, Shadow of God in the world, Abul-Fath, Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, Padshah Ghazi (whose kingdom God perpetuate!), is a most just, a most wise, and a most God-fearing king.

Should, therefore, in future a religious question come up, regarding which the opinions of the Mujahids are at variance, and His Majesty, in his penetrating understanding and clear wisdom be inclined to adopt, for the benefit of the nation and as a political expedient, any of the conflicting opinions which exist on that point, and should issue a decree to that effect.

We do hereby agree that such a decree shall be binding on us and on the whole nation.

‘Further, we declare that should His Majesty think fit to issue a new order, we and the nation shall likewise be bound by it; provided always, that such order be not only in accordance with some verse of the Quran, but also of real benefit to the nation; and further, that any opposition on the part of his subjects to such an order passed by His Majesty shall involve damnation in the world to come and loss of property and religious privileges in this.

This document has been written with honest intentions for the

glory of God and the propagation of Islam, and is signed by us, the principal *ulama* and lawyers, in the month of Rajab in the year nine hundred and eightyseven (987).

A clearer proof could not be given of the high purpose with which Akbar was motivated. The Jesuit missionaries and fanatics like Badaouni resorted to exaggerations, if not downright lies, out of spite and bigotry. Pinheiro's observation that in Akbar's reign the mosques were used as stables and that the leaves of the Quran were used to wipe dust from children's feet is a lie too blatant to carry conviction. That the western historians like Vincent Smith and Wolsley Haig pinned their trust in such sources and drew gruesome pictures of persecution of Muslims is indefensible.

*Sulah-i-Kul* was Akbar's motto. There was no reason for him to alienate, much less persecute, a section of the population on whose support he depended in the main for safeguarding the integrity of his empire. For twenty years after the promulgation of *Din-i-Illahi*, Muslim soldiers continued to fight by his side in wars of extreme hardship, and thus gave proof of their loyalty to him. Their steadfast devotion to the Emperor also nails to the ground the highly tendentious observations of western annalists; the latter were prone to be guided by the testimony of jilted writers; their presumption that Badaounis and Pinheiros were angels who could not make an exaggeration, much less tell a lie, is disproved by a surfeit of circumstantial evidence. Akbar wanted to make friends of his enemies, not vice-versa. He would not have merited the honour of being classed among the great monarchs of the world had he committed even a fraction of the indiscretions he is alleged to have perpetrated. *Din-i-Illahi* was a glorious failure. Max Mueller described Akbar as the first student of comparative religion; he was also the first monarch in medieval times to recognize the equality of all religions.

There is, according to Schopenhauer, a boiling point in the life of man at which all faith, all revelation, all authority evaporates, and at which he seeks truth by his personal intuition; this is the stage when he yearns to learn, and also wishes to be convinced. This is the time when "the leading-strings of childhood have fallen off, and he wants to walk unaided." Akbar was a high-voltage rational individual; he could not bring himself to accept such religious and philosophical theorems as could not be verified by

his own experiences. The boiling point in his life was reached when the Muslim, Christian, Jain, Zoroastrian and Hindu teachers failed to satisfy his curiosity, and left him to discover his own God, his own means for self-realization, and his own rituals for development of the spirit. Thus he came to walk alone, and ponder over the anatomy of reality. The transient, he realized early, could be anything but real; the matter and the senses, therefore, came to occupy a secondary place in his experiments for the search of truth. Often he experienced an inner effulgence, a light that not only showed the way, but also uplifted and inspired. The intensity of his experiences convinced him that the permanent was within, and not outside. Step by step, he came to the gates of Sufism, stood there for a while in wide-eyed rapture, and then entered to find there opening up before him a panorama of unity in diversity, a transcendence that made separatism look pale and unreal. Akbar thus came to discover what he was yearning for—a mode of life and prayer unhemmed by tradition and superstition, an ultimate being benevolent and merciful with an infinite capacity for love and understanding. This was the Illahi, the Allah of Akbar's new order, a pragmatic system of priorities aimed at transforming the Mughal empire into a brotherhood of man. Here was an end that was its own justification. The means, formulated by Akbar himself, were the HCF of the modes of life of all his subjects. A look at the ceremonial prescribed will bear this out.

In the morning, the midday, at sunset and at midnight, prayers were enjoined. The sun and the fire were the objects of veneration, and everybody was expected to rise when the lamps were lit in the evening. No manifestation of God was as effulgent and sacred as the sun; hence the desirability of doing it obeisance in the morning. In 1583, an edict of complete tolerance was issued; all those who had been converted to Islam by force were allowed to re-embrace the religion of their birth. Meat-eating was banned on certain days of the year. Marriages of near-relatives, such as cousins, were prohibited. Boys were not to marry before their sixteenth and girls before their fourteenth year. The Islamic injunction against the wearing of silken robes at the time of prayers was withdrawn. To the long list of the festivals of Hindustan were added the fourteen festivals of Persia; all citizens of the Empire were expected to attend these festivals. Friday prayers were obli-



gatory on all Muslims. The old Persian names of the months were brought into use. The study of Arabic was no longer compulsory. On the other hand, the study of astronomy, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, poetry, history and the fine arts was encouraged. High priests of all religions were required to attend the Nauroz (the New Year) feast. Leading linguists, including Badaouni, were commissioned to translate into Persian the holy books of all religions; copies were made available to scholars for consultation. Slaughter of animals was prohibited on Sundays and in the month of the Emperor's birth. In the winter, the Emperor wore clothes made of white *suf*,\* and expected the likeminded courtiers and common citizens to do the same.

The above list is far from being complete. The *Shast*-carrying members of *Din-i-Illahi* were required to take a "vow of discipleship"—a pledge to serve the Emperor, if need be, with their property, life, honour and religion. *Zaminbos* (kissing the ground) was obligatory for disciples when entering the royal presence. This was not *sajda* as Badaouni alleges, but a variation of the *kornish* prevalent at the Mughal court.

The number of Akbar's disciples at no stage exceeded a few thousand. The creed died quickly after his death, although there is evidence of Jahangir administering the oath of discipleship to some Hindu and Muslim dignitaries. That *Din-i-Illahi* did not take root is not surprising. The people of Hindustan knew of only two main religions, Hinduism and Islam; the rest, to them, were mere corollaries to emphasize the changing priorities. Some intellectual elite did appreciate the political wisdom of Akbar's initiative, but even they could not derive any solace, much less inspiration, from the code of ethical and semi-metaphysical values the Padshah formulated. Ata-ul-Mulk was right when he told Sultan Ala-ud-Din Khilji that the sceptre of sainthood could not be carried by one who wore the crown. Akbar ventured an experiment that could not but fail to beget the results expected. Only if he had stopped short of giving the appearance of being in competition with Muhammad, Christ, Buddha and Zoroaster, he might have emerged as a rare vintage reformer resolved to assure a better deal for the depressed and the poor. The concept of "one faith, one

\**Suf* means rough wool. Clothes made from this material were generally worn by men of God; hence they came to be called Sufis.

people" was as bold as it was ingenious. His defeat was in fact a call to the generations to come to raise man to a position of dignity. Akbar was a great conqueror; he was also a great visionary.

## Spectacular Kabul Campaign

Akbar was not a genocidal Asian despot; he wanted all faiths to flower and their followers to live in peace and with equal dignity. The Muslim feudal chiefs, as also the Muslim priestly class, who had enjoyed a privileged position for nearly five hundred years, could not but be hostile to the Emperor's programme of social reform. Abolition of subsistence allowances paid on the basis of religion was a measure that stirred mini-revolts, especially in areas where the Central authority was comparatively tenuous. Anti-corruption steps initiated by the over-zealous Diwan, Shah Mansur,\* irked the Afghan nobility of the eastern provinces who, though humbled on the battlefield, had not yet fully reconciled themselves to Mughal hegemony. Rationalization of the system of land revenue and the order prescribing the branding of horses kept for imperial service were the two enactments which escalated the prevailing discontent, and became convenient tools in the hands of the aggrieved Mullas to stoke the fires of revolt.

The things came to a head when the influential Kazi of Jaunpur, Muhammad Yezdi, issued a *fatwa* declaring rebellion against Akbar not only lawful but obligatory for the followers of the Prophet:

The very fundamentals of our religion are threatened. The five

\*A man of humble origin, Shah Mansur rose to the high office of Diwan because of his extraordinary skill in accounting.

cardinal injunctions of Islam\* are thrown to the winds. Our traditional society faces a grave crisis. Our spiritual values are openly subjected to ridicule at Fatehpur. Heretics and non-believers are in favour at the court. Pious Muslims and their families are in disgrace. This is intolerable. In the name of the Holy Prophet (on whom be peace) it is enjoined upon every Mussalman to rise against the rule of Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar. The great Allah is on our side. The infidels must be overthrown. Ours is a just and holy cause.

The disgruntled rallied under the leadership of one Masum Khan, an Afghan known to be in touch with Akbar's step-brother, Mirza Muhammad Hakim, in Kabul. The rebels secretly invited Hakim to stake his claim to the throne of Hindustan, and join them in a pincer movement to overthrow Akbar. The latter realized the danger of this alliance and, in a belated bid to defuse the gathering hostility against him, dismissed Shah Mansur, announced liberal increases of wages to imperial civil and military personnel in Bihar and Bengal, relaxed rules regarding the payment of arrears of land revenue, withdrew partly the regulation enforcing the branding of horses, and at the same time instructed the Governor, Muzaffar Khan, to take suitable steps to put down the insurrection with or without the use of force. The rebels were, however, not to be easily assuaged by words, and proceeded, rather disorganizedly, to implement their plan of revolt. The arrogance and lack of tact of the imperial officers worsened the situation. Muzaffar Khan was killed in a sharp, sudden uprising a few miles east of Patna. This and other unexpected reverses caused considerable disquiet in Fatehpur. Apprehension of an invasion by Hakim prevented Akbar from leading yet another military expedition to the east; he recognized that the real threat lay in the west, and made preparations to liquidate his overambitious, wayward brother before intervening personally to quell the recalcitrant Afghans. However, he despatched sizable reinforcements for the defence of strategic forts and passes in Bihar, Bengal and eastern Oudh.

\*The five cardinal obligations of a Muslim are (i) faith in the *kalama*, (ii) saying the prayers five times a day, (iii) observation of Ramazan, (iv) giving of *zakat*, and (v) pilgrimage to Mecca.

The overall command of operations against the rebels was entrusted to his foster-brother Aziz Koka,\* a general whose loyalty was as great as his skill in the art of warfare. He was instructed to be resilient in his approaches, but to be firm and even ruthless in safeguarding the realm. Bloodshed was to be avoided if possible, but no human considerations were to be allowed to come in the way of calling a halt to the designs of the rebels. Aziz Koka was successful in fulfilling this delicate mission. Masum Khan and his companions-in-arms soon realized the futility of armed resistance to the Mughal might, and ran for the safety of isolated remote pockets of rebellion. Koka held the eastern provinces firmly while the Emperor proceeded to the west on the biggest and most hazardous military campaign of his career.

This situation aroused in Akbar an unprecedented will to conquer. An army of fifty thousand cavalry, five hundred elephants, a host of infantry estimated at two hundred thousand, a thousand pieces of heavy and medium-size guns, and an uncounted number of camp-followers was put on the alert. This prodigious assemblage of men and animals along with unlimited provisions of food and war equipment moved out of Fatehpur on 8 February 1581, like a composite, well-oiled machine. In the conception, planning and execution of this colossal military movement, the organizational genius of Akbar came into full play. No detail was too minor to be left to others; he inspected and approved himself every section of the expeditionary force before the marching orders were given. Prince Salim, who was then twelve, and Prince Murad, a year younger, headed the royal entourage. Seventeen ladies of the royal harem also were part of the entourage.

Raja Man Singh was sent in advance to take charge of the governorship of Punjab and the entire Sind region. His brother, the valiant Suraj Singh, was given command of the advance guard. A galaxy of Muslim and Rajput generals were summoned to take part in the expedition. Among them were Mirza Yusuf Khan, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Saiyed Muhammad Khan, Rai Rai Singh, Rai Durga Prasad, Rai Madan Mohan Chauhan, Raja Balka Rai, Raja Ramchand, Thakur Sain Das, Prithi Raj, Ram Dass,

\*Aziz Khan Koka was a foster-brother of Akbar. His father Shams-ud-Din Khan Ataka, was Hamida Banu Begum's faithful attendant during Humayun's flight from India in 1542.

Mathra Das, Sanwal Das, and a large number of other lesser luminaries of the court. The induction of a large number of Hindu stalwarts of unquestioned loyalty was significant. The cry of a holy war raised by the rebels warranted that step. Akbar took no chances. The stakes were too high for a slip-up in circumspection. Akbar's life-work, and also his future, hung in the balance. The gravity of the crisis was not lost upon him, and it was, therefore, not surprising that men whose fidelity was even slightly suspect were either liquidated or left behind to serve in distant places. Shah Mansur\* was the most dangerous of them all. He was strongly suspected of being in league with the rebels; his alleged complicity with Muhammad Hakim was believed to have been proved by the chance discovery of letters that passed between the two. Akbar was in a dilemma. The Diwan was too crafty an official to be left behind, and too unreliable to be given a position of trust in the expedition. The Emperor chose the lesser danger; he took Mansur with him as his personal adviser in the hope that subsequent events might disprove the evidence of his tie-up with Hakim. But when the Emperor was in camp near Panipat, an emissary from Raja Man Singh brought yet another set of letters alleged to have been written by Shah Mansur to Mirza Hakim. These had been found in the personal baggage of Muhammad Shadman, an Afghan General killed in an engagement with the Mughal forces near Attock. This evidence was found conclusive. Akbar confronted the Shah with a charge of treason, and ordered him to be hanged on a tree near Kot Katchwaha. The punishment meted out to Mansur perhaps served as a timely warning to others who might have been engaged in the disloyal, double game of travelling with Akbar to side with Hakim in the end. The voice of treason was heard no more. In Mansur's death Akbar lost a brilliant accountant, a man who provided the basis of land and administrative reforms associated with the reign of the great Mughal.

Some historians voice a suspicion that the letters, on the basis of which Mansur was put to death, were forged, by courtiers aspiring to hold the lucrative post of the Diwan. It is also suggested that the forgeries were master-minded by Raja Todar Mal. He

\*Akbar had reinstated Shah Mansur as Diwan when he found that his dismissal had failed to mollify the insurgents.

could not have become Finance Minister and later Prime Minister for as long as Shah Mansur enjoyed the royal favour. Muslim chroniclers also implicate Raja Man Singh and Raja Birbal in the conspiracy. Towards the end of his life, it is stated, Akbar came to know the truth and grieved much at the injustice done to Mansur.

The progress of the grand army towards Kabulistan, according to the Jesuit Missionary Monserrate, was a marvel of advance planning, an exercise in smooth transportation which has few parallels in the medieval Indian history. Food supplies en route were abundant, so much so that meats and vegetables and grains were cheaper in the camp than in the cities. The Padshah spared himself no effort to see that all sections of the army received their allotted rations of foodstuff regularly. He himself fully indulged his penchant for hunting, but without disrupting the march. White mosque-like tents for prayers were pitched in advance at the appointed camp sites. Education of the Princes Salim and Murad was not allowed to suffer. Their tutor-guardians, one of them being Monserrate, were provided with school-tents and paraphernalia for the academic and physical training of the princes. In the evenings the camp, which in fact comprised hundreds of good-size townships under tents, came alive with feasting and merry-making. Akbar would often disguise himself to attend these celebrations and thus acquaint himself first hand with the opinions and sentiments of the common fighting man. To the ascetic padre Monserrate, the royal enclosure was a fairyland, a part of paradise on earth overflowing with riches that dazzled the eye; it hummed with activities normally associated with the palaces of Asian potentates. He was struck with the smoothness of it all, the organizational expertise which went into the making and unmaking of these huge towns-in-tents every day. Akbar was fastidious about the food served to his favourite elephants. Once he found out that Gajaraj was not given his ration of almonds and honey, and he ordered the keeper of the Fil-Khana to be denied food for eight days. The Begums and their maid-servants were under the charge of the seniormost commandant of the camp. No aspect of their daily routine was neglected. The tent-palaces they occupied in the centre of the royal enclosure were guarded by teams of trusted eunuchs and Ahidis, the King's personal body-guard. The Padshah made it a point to visit the Begums in rotation. Wine parties and nautch performances were frequently held.

Akbar at forty was a less copious bibber than he was in his younger days. Sometimes he would go without a drop of wine for weeks, then the family lusts would take control; it was on such days that Akbar would "stretch evenings into mornings" and go on his daily inspection rounds without having a wink of sleep. A Persian brew Ab-i-Hayat was his favourite. When he wanted to drink, says Nizam-ud-Din, "this elixir of life sold cheap in the tents of the royal enclosure." Akbar drank hard; he could consume cups after cups of this concoction without showing any effect either on his face, or in his behaviour.

Twice a week Akbar visited the Princes in their tents and made searching inquiries about their performances and aptitudes. The tall and lean Murad was the brighter of the two, and showed promise of developing into a fearless soldier. Salim, like Akbar himself, was prone to suffer from fits of depression; he was often found grappling inwardly with the imponderables of love, life and death. Said Khan, one of his tutors, confided to Akbar about the Wali-Ahad's "lapses into abstraction," and ventured to suggest that a hunt might be arranged to wean him away from "the afflictions of the soul." Akbar's reaction, according to Abul Fazl, was violent:

I respect you for your learning, but the cure you prescribe for Sheikhu Baba is worse than the disease. Let him wrestle freely with himself. He will be wiser for the experience. To suppress one's soul with the excitement of extinguishing innocent lives is a sin; it is a breach of the laws of humanity. I go hunting, not to escape but to realize myself. Worry not overmuch over Sheikhu's wanderings within; these are signs of an active, healthy mind. Did not Sheikh Sa'adi say that not to reflect is to court living death? Leave him alone. He has the making of a fine young man.

Paternal partiality blinded Akbar to his son's failings. He lived to rue his Sheikhu's over-concern with his own self.

Akbar's intelligence service was quick and dependable. Scouts from the front brought news of initial setbacks suffered by the advance armies of Muhammad Hakim. Later, the Mirza himself advanced to Punjab at the head of twenty-five thousand cavalry, hoping that the Muslim population would rise to a man to support



his cause. His expectations came to naught when he found the gates of Lahore closed firmly against him. The imperial army, led by Muslim and Rajput generals, was resolute in its defence of Punjab and the adjoining territories. Not only that; the population looked askance at the invaders, and denied the Kabulis both moral and material assistance. After a brief stay at the outskirts of Lahore,\* Hakim became panicky and beat an ignominious retreat. He narrowly escaped death while crossing the river Chenab; nearly a thousand of his cavalry were swept away by the current. When Akbar came to know about the flight of his brother back to Kabul, he sent a special envoy to him with a letter:

We are resolved to crush the insurrection you are unfortunately involved in. The best course for you would be to surrender unconditionally, and come to us personally to seek forgiveness for acts of disloyalty. You may count on our generosity for an honourable reception and a fair treatment. It is not our intention to humiliate you. Our sole aim is to safeguard the integrity of the empire, and to assure that all our subjects live in peace and with dignity. I shall await your reply before crossing the blue river.\*\*

The Mirza considered the implication of the offer, and decided not to accept it. The hills, the rivers, the narrow passes and the religious fanaticism of tribesmen, he calculated, were on his side. The Emperor, he thought, would be hard put to it to transport his elephants and heavy artillery across the Khyber, and that the implied threat was a mere braggadocio, the fulmination of a man desperately in search of the means to rehabilitate his image in the eyes of the Muslim population. However, Hakim repeated his assertions of fidelity, and offered to send his son Qaikabad to the imperial camp. Akbar was disappointed. He could not be satisfied with anything less than what he had demanded. There was to be no compromise with one who had rebelled against his authority. Though aware of the physical hazards ahead, he pressed on with

\*The camp of Mirza Muhammad Hakim was pitched in the garden of Mahdi Kasim Khan outside Lahore. Akbar ordered Man Singh not to check the Mirza's advance till he reached Lahore.

\*\*The river Indus was known as Nil-Ab (blue waters) in Transoxiana.

singular determination to gain what he had set out to achieve. There was no going back in the military manual of Akbar.

Speeding westward via Panipat, Thanesar, Shahbad (where Shah Mansur was hanged) Ambala, Sirhind, Payal (where the news came of Hakim's withdrawal) Kalanaur and Rohtas, Akbar pitched his camp on the bank of the river Indus; here he remained for fifty days discussing with himself and his officers the blue-print of the final stage of the campaign. The weather, the terrain and the unpredictability of tribal reaction were the factors that led a majority of commanders to doubt the wisdom of scaling the Hindu-kush. Akbar listened to their arguments with the patience of one who knew what he was going to do; he hid his plans behind a veil of open mindedness, and deputed his closest confidant, Abul Fazl, to reason the objectors out of their pusillanimity. The dissenters, however, persisted in their objections. Akbar then decided to assert himself. He called a council of his advisers, gave them a searing lecture on the ethics of warfare, and ended thus:

My decision is final and irrevocable. Alone, or with you all, I shall cross the river at dawn tomorrow. Such of you as have cold feet may return to the comfort of the plains. I have not come all the way from Fatehpur for a holiday on the bank of Indus. Mirza Hakim's hopes and calculations are based on the ignorance of the resolve that surges within me. He has to be brought to his knees whatever the cost. I have nothing more to say. Everyone of you is expected to be at his post when the drums are sounded in the morning.

The finality of the decision was evident. The waverers were taken unawares, and they saw the futility of further reasoning to win their point. Akbar, however, agreed to a proposal submitted by Abul Fazl at the instance of Father Monserrate that a last attempt might be made to induce Hakim to shed obduracy and present himself before the Emperor for reconciliation. To that end, an envoy was sent to Kabul with the following communication:

Let that brother, who holds the position of a son, receive knowledge and gather eternal bliss. Princes of illustrious houses, and the great men of every land receive radiance from our benevolence. Why shall he who is so connected with us sit in the

defile of seclusion and hostility? How long shall he do so? How long will he, in company with base people, move about in the hollow of loss? It behoves him not to give ear to the buzzings of fly-like men, but to come and do homage at our threshold so that our love for him may be impressed on all, far or near, and that he may spend the few days of life in a proper manner, and that he may end his days with a good name.

Once again, Akbar drew a blank. Hakim remained unmoved by the Emperor's arguments. Instead, he prepared to meet the challenge, and sent word to the friendly tribal chiefs to get ready for a war in which there were to be no fronts, no pitched battles, and no decisive victories or defeats. He himself strengthened the defences of the city, and summoned his generals to work out a plan to beat back the invading force.

Akbar kept his word, divided the army into three parts, arranged each segment into the traditional battle array, and launched a massive thrust forward. The first to cross the Sind was Prince Murad, who was assisted by Raja Man Singh and many other Rajput braves. Akbar himself followed three days later on 12 July. Prince Salim was the last to step into hostile territory. A galaxy of Muslim generals, headed by Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan remained by his side to meet any emergency. The size and splendour of the Mughal force, complete with mountain-like elephants carrying heavy guns on their backs, struck terror in the hearts of defenders. Opposition melted away—"like snow under the sun"—as this mighty force reached Jalalabad via Peshawar and the Khyber pass. Without stopping, Man Singh pressed forward and crushed whatever resistance came his way. Abul Fazl writes pages in praise of the eleven-year old Murad who, he says, displayed Babar-like valour to defeat the armies sent by Hakim to halt his advance. After allowing for the pronounced strain of flattery which runs throughout *Akbarnama*, one may not be unjustified in believing that Murad did actually take part in fighting and that he acquitted himself as well as a lad of eleven could be expected to do. Babar ascended the throne of Farghana when he was fourteen. Akbar himself was of the same age when he confronted Hemu at Panipat in 1556. Mughal Princes matured early; they also withered away early. It is, therefore, not surprising that Murad, at eleven, was proficient in the use of the sword and the

spear. Akbar thought highly of him as a soldier.

Hakim lost nerve as the vanguard of the imperial force approached Kabul. He fled towards Badakhshan. His sister, Bakht-un-Nissa,\* accompanied him. The fleeing family hid in the hills nearby when Murad and Man Singh entered Kabul on 3 August. The Raja quickly took charge of all the city gates, disbanded Hakim's militia, posted his men at all strategic points in and outside the citadel, and waited for the arrival of the Emperor. Akbar's entry into Kabul on 9 August was a landmark in his military exploits, a reiteration indeed of his cardinal belief that courage is the weapon with which wars are won. Elated, he occupied the throne on which once sat Babar and Humayun, and loosened the strings of his purse to propitiate the gods and reward his followers. His generosity was limitless and, according to Nizam-ud-Din, the people of Kabul stood wide-eyed at the manner in which "the scion of the house of Timur distributed vast quantities of wealth amongst the poor."

Muhammad Hakim, conscious of his own acts of disloyalty, fled away to the safety of a friendly hamlet on the outskirts of Badakhshan. Bakht-un-Nissa, however, returned to Kabul, and was received by Akbar with honour due to a royal sister. She pleaded on behalf of Hakim, and tried to assure Akbar of her brother's fidelity. The Emperor relented and, for reasons of convenience, agreed not to pursue the war further. He entrusted the government of Kabul to Bakht-un-Nissa, and left on 16 August for Delhi. A longer stay in Kabulistan, he calculated, would be inadvisable. The vagaries of tribal loyalties, vulnerability of supply lines to weather and enemy action, approach of the winter and, lastly, the eagerness of his followers to return home as quickly as possible—these were the considerations that led Akbar to limit his stay in Kabul to mere seven days. He had scored his point in that Hakim had been humbled, if not totally subjugated. Bakht-un-Nissa was to run the government in his name and not in that of Hakim. The *khutba* in his name had been read from the mosques of Kabul. A majority of tribal chiefs had affirmed their loyalty to him. No further purpose could be served by extension of his stay in the territory. Before leaving, Akbar did homage at the tomb of his grand-

\*Bakht-un-Nissa, a full sister of Hakim and a step sister of Akbar, was married to Khwaja Hassan of Badakhshan.

father Babar, and granted a small jagir for the maintenance of the priests who offered prayers there every Friday. He also revisited some of the gardens and palaces he used to frequent in his childhood. According to Abul Fazl, the Emperor went from one place to another like a child in search of a lost toy. The past was a reality Akbar could never ignore, much less forget. Kabul meant much to him; here was a point in history from which he started twenty seven years ago to keep a date with destiny in the plains of Hindustan. In reasserting his writ in Kabul, he had turned a full circle; no Muslim ruler in India had made such conquests before. The expedition to Kabul was an emphatic affirmation of his faith in God and himself.

The Mirza reappeared in Kabul not long after Akbar's departure. Bakht-un-Nissa was too weak and too loving a creature to ignore her brother's presence; gradually, the control of the province passed into his hands. Akbar had no option but to acquiesce in this de facto arrangement. However, the Mirza was not destined to rule over Kabul for long. He died in July 1585. His end came with an orgy of drinking for two days and nights. After the Mirza's death, Kabul became, juridically and in fact, a province of Hindustan.

Akbar reached Fatehpur Sikri in December 1581 after an absence of ten months. His empire, stretching from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal and extending to the river Tapti in the south, was now held firmly in his grip. The threatened alliance of Mirza Muhammad Hakim and Afghan dissidents in the east had been effectively forestalled and nipped before it could develop into a general rebellion. Opposition to his zeal for religious and administrative reforms withered away gradually. The Kabul campaign sharpened his image as a man of great will-power, one who regarded destiny to be a hand maid of his determination, and one who would not let either man or nature get the better of his resolution. *Din-i-Illahi*, abolition of discriminatory taxes, withdrawal of jagirs given to undeserving individuals, cancellation of maintenance allowances to unworthy Mullas, strict enforcement of measures aimed at rooting out corruption, and promulgation of the ten-year land revenue system—all these steps were parts of his campaign to strengthen the foundations of his empire, the means to build a nation united in purpose and loyalty.

The years 1581-82 marked, to use an incisive Churchilllean

phrase, the end of the beginning in Akbar's war against injustice and intolerance. The objectives he set himself to achieve were laudable. That he failed to attain them only confirmed that social revolutions cannot be disassociated entirely from the processes of evolution,

## Showing the Flag in the North-West

With Akbar's return to Fatehpur-Sikri, the Empire entered what may be called the era of Todar Mal. This talented man of comparatively low origin rose to occupy the highest office in the empire by virtue of what Abul Fazl calls his "incomparable courage, administrative skill and freedom from avarice." The first and only Hindu to become Prime Minister (Vakil) under any Mughal ruler, Todar Mal came to symbolize the socio-religious priorities Akbar laid stress on. The Emperor's one all-consuming ambition was to solder Hindustan into a unity transcending race, religion and riches.

Todar Mal was the son of a poor peasant of the village of Laharpur in Oudh; he was charged with the task of breaking time-honoured barriers, and thus strengthen the foundations of an empire such as Rome had barely compassed. Having risen from the ranks (he started his life as a petty clerk in the office of the local representative of the Diwan), he was well aware of the hazards he had to contend with. Vested interests were the biggest of them all, and therefore it was not surprising that he soon acquired the dubious distinction of being the most-hated wazir since Bairam Khan. Even the otherwise large-hearted Abul Fazl accused him of bigotry and hauteur and alleged that not unoften was he motivated by considerations other than the good of the common man. But Akbar stood firmly behind his protege, and never doubted the intentions of his first Minister. And, it needs to be stressed in fairness to the Raja that he served his master till the end of his days with the

loyalty of a devotee.

Todar Mal kept himself aloof from *Din-i-Illahi* and its symbolic rituals, but that in no way affected his equation with the Emperor. Once, with a copy of the Gita in one hand and that of Ramayana in the other, he told Akbar that Hinduism enjoined upon the *praja* to look upon the King not only as an image of God, but God Himself. "My submission to you, sire, is total. In my religion there are no gradations of loyalty. My life is at your beck and call. It is my dharma to carry out the wishes of my sovereign. Therein lies my salvation. This is the surest road to bliss in this and the world hereafter."

Akbar was pleased with the Raja's sincerity, and never again did he bring up before his Minister the doubts that at times afflicted his soul.

It may not be relevant to stuff this study with details of the land and revenue reforms\* introduced by Todar Mal to eliminate discriminations; perhaps it will be sufficient to say that the measures he initiated have stood the test of time, and even to this day the systems of land measurement and assessment of revenue bear the stamp of his genius.

Todar Mal was, in a way, Akbar's alter-ego, a deputy who was in complete agreement with his sovereign's ideals and aspirations. Their patterns of thought were similar; so were the ways in which they sought to translate their plans into concrete achievements. If Akbar bent over backwards to bring Muslims nearer to Hindus, Todar Mal utilized the administrative machinery at his command to induce Hindus to shed their age-old prejudices. By making it obligatory that all Government records and accounts should be kept in Persian, he created a necessity which in a short time resulted in Hindus achieving high proficiency in the court language, and thus qualifying themselves for responsible government posts. Linguistic oneness at all levels of administration was a big step forward towards the goal of cultural integration Akbar yearned after. The measure sparked a veritable social revolution, and the amalgam of spiritual and philosophical values enshrined in Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic and Turki languages became a reality. Perhaps the eminence that Urdu attained in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be attributed partly to the compulsion

\*For details, please see *Akbarnama* folios 381, 382 and 383.



introduced by Todar Mal.

The Nauroz\* of 1582 had more glitter than any before. The turmoils of the past were over, the present was without a speck of dark cloud overhead, and the future a certainty of further successes and prosperity. Surrounded by a galaxy of grantees 'dressed in the silks of loyalty and brocades of bravery,' Akbar was a picture of authority and benevolence; his confidence in himself was a halo that dazzled the courtiers. After the midday prayers, the Emperor reappeared in the hall of audience, and asked his topmost counsellors to make one recommendation each for improvement of social conditions. Abul Fazl's account of the suggestions made reflects in some measure the changes that were taking place in the minds of men at that time:

Among these representations was that of Prince Sultan Salim. He represented that marriage should not take place before the age of twelve, that much harm and little advantage accrued from the contrary practice. Khan-i-Azam Mirza Koka represented that the governors of the imperial provinces should not have the boldness to cut the thread of life, and that until they had laid the matter before His Majesty they should not stain their hands by destroying what God had built.

Khan-i-Khanan said it would be good if fragments of life such as small birds and creeping things were not destroyed, and if many lives were not destroyed for a small benefit.

Raja Todar Mal said that every day charities should be distributed at the palace, and that it should be an order that the officers also should every week, month, or year have a care of the empty-handed. Mirza Yusuf Khan represented that a daily journal of events should be obtained from all the cities and towns. Raja Birbal expressed a wish that some right-minded and energetic men should act as inspectors in various places, and should represent impartially the condition of oppressed people and seekers after justice, and report unavoidable calamities. Qasim Khan's suggestion was that inns should be established on routes throughout the empire so that travellers might obtain repose.

Sheikh Jamal represented that some disinterested and experi-

\*Every anniversary of Akbar's ascent to the throne (which fell on 11 March) was celebrated in the form of Nauroz (New Year Day).

enced men should be appointed who should bring to court those who were in distress and want. Sheikh Faizi begged that some experienced and sympathetic persons might be appointed in the cities and bazars who should fix the price of articles. Hakim Abul Fateh wished for the establishment of hospitals. The writer of the noble volume (Abul Fazl) petitioned that police officers of every city and town should record the householders thereof, name by name, and trade by trade, and should always keep a close eye on their income and expenditure, and should expel the do-nothings, the mischievous, and the bad.

The Emperor accepted all the suggestions except one made by Prince Salim. He raised the age of marriage for girls to fourteen and for boys to sixteen. Instructions were given to Raja Todar Mal to assure that henceforth marriages below these ages were declared void, and to issue warnings to priests of all religions that solemnization of marriages where either partner was below the prescribed age was an unpardonable offence. It is perhaps significant that this ruling was in line with the don'ts of *Din-i-Illahi*.

Just as Akbar put his faith in what may be termed armed peace, he exercised authority throughout his life with a show of touching benevolence. The glory of mercy was, to him, greater than the glory of vengeance. It was, therefore, not surprising that the New Year celebrations started invariably with release of slaves and prisoners, declarations of amnesty, distribution of money to the poor, and grant of maintenance allowances to intellectuals of proved worth. The success of the Kabul campaign sent Akbar God-ward, and he opened the gates of the treasury to propitiate the indigent. In the evening of 11 March but before "the sun had withdrawn the umbrella of its radiant rays from the bedecked city of Fatehpur-Sikri," Akbar had himself weighed separately against gold, silver, copper, silks, butter, perfumes, precious herbs, rice, milk, iron, grains and salt, and distributed the items in accordance with a plan drawn up by the court astrologers. The poor of every religion benefited thereby. Abul Fazl prepared a list of persons and organizations who "partook of the Emperor's munificence" and placed it before him the next morning. Akbar was pleased, and ordered that henceforth he would be similarly weighed twice a year—first on the New Year day and again on the day of his birth. In the eyes of his subjects, in particular the Hindus, he thus became a

Chakravarti, supreme war lord of Hindustan, a monarch who ruled with the twin weapons of love and sword. A folk-song sums up Akbar beautifully:

Our hearts are aflutter with joy.

We sing merrily in praise of the good King Akbar, and we dance to express our happiness.

The maidens of Muttra want neither gold nor silver nor the butter he was weighed against;

Neither do they want silks nor corn and copper.

What they want is bliss, the bliss of peace that prevails in our land.

Oh, Lord Krishna, give our Akbar a long life,

He is just, he is kind, he is generous

Our hearts are aflutter with joy.

Little did Akbar know that he was nearing the end of his stay in Fatehpur-Sikri and Agra, the twin cities from where he had ruled for over twenty-seven years. The palaces and forts and gardens he had built to honour Sheikh Salim Chishti were soon to be left behind to languish in their stately loneliness. Rebellions in Bengal and Gujarat had been finally quelled. Though the Sultanates of the Deccan flaunted their independence, yet they constituted no threat to the empire. For a time, Akbar contemplated mounting an expedition to the south, but the events in Kabul and Transoxiana claimed priority. Mirza Muhammad Hakim died suddenly at the age of thirty-one. The resulting power vacuum stirred the ambitions of the fierce Uzbek Abdullah Khan\* on the one hand and the fanatic followers of Sheikh Bayazid Ansari\*\* on the other. In the preceding two decades Abdullah and his ruthless son, Munim Khan, had captured Bokhara, Balkh, Samarkand, Farghana, Khorasan and Badakhshan, and were now poised to oust the Timurids from Kabulistan.

\*Abdullah Khan was a son of the Uzbek chief Sikandar and a great grandson of Abul Khair. He was born in 1533. His father died in 1583. His son Munim Khan was dreaded throughout Transoxiana for his cruelty.

\*\*Bayazid Ansari was born at Jullundur in Punjab. His father was named Abdullah and mother Banin. Frustrations at home (his father remarried and went to Afghanistan) led Bayazid to become a horse-dealer and repair to the hills of Swat.

However, a greater danger to the western sector of Akbar's empire came from the Indian-born Afghan Bayazid, an ultra-conservative Muslim who had proclaimed himself to be the promised Mahdi, and was leading a movement against the alleged heresies of the Mughal Emperor. Fired by a compulsive religious zeal, he chose to use force to win allegiance to himself. The learning and asceticism of this newest prophet were impressive; the tribal people rallied round him in large numbers and called him Pir-i-Raushan, the enlightened master. His followers thus came to be known as Raushanias. Though professing tenets similar to those of Sufism, they deployed the sword against all those who doubted, much less denied, the prophethood Bayazid claimed. Their religious zeal was stoked by the vast quantities of loot that fell to their hands. The effete and drunkard Mirza Hakim was too weak and self-centred to put an end to their plunderings. His removal from the scene by Fate whetted further Bayazid's lust for power, and he planned a knockout blow before Akbar moved in to restore order.

The news from Kabul and adjoining territories was disquieting and Akbar, sensing danger, decided to lead himself an expedition to the western provinces. The safety of Punjab, he reckoned, was essential for the inviolability of the empire; hence his plan to set up a base in Punjab for operations against all those who cast covetous eyes on his domains.

With all the vast paraphernalia of a Mughal army—elephants, horses, mules, gun-carriages, engineers, bridge-builders, road-cutters, sappers and miners, traders, a multitude of camp-followers, contingents of eunuchs and personal bodyguard to look after the ladies of the harem—Akbar set out of Fatehpur-Sikri on 22 August 1585. Sultan Salim and his newly-appointed guardian Mirza Khan, son of Bairam Khan, were sent in advance to prepare camping grounds; Princes Murad and Daniyal accompanied the Emperor. A host of top Muslim and Rajput generals were inducted for active service. Raja Man Singh, the most loyal and bravest of them all, was named Governor of Kabul and asked to proceed post-haste to take charge of his assignment. The ultimate destination and real purpose of this biggest expeditionary force Akbar had ever led was a secret known to him and a few of his top counsellors only. Some believed they were heading for Badakhshan, others felt the goal was Kabul, and many among the junior commanders were convinced that their destination was Lahore.

The first indication of the Emperor's mind came at Kalanaur from where he sent a team of envoys to the court of Sultan Yusuf Shah of Kashmir. Akbar wanted Yusuf to come and do homage to him as overlord; the latter's earlier plea that the distance prevented him from making the trip to Fatehpur was no longer valid. Akbar considered Kashmir to be his territory both by inheritance and conquest. Babar's first cousin, Haider Mirza Doughlat\* ruled Kashmir for eleven years following the ouster of Humayun from Hindustan by Sher Shah in 1542. Moreover, it was with Akbar's assistance that Yusuf came to the throne at Srinagar. It is true that Yusuf in 1581 sent his youngest son Haidar and two years later his eldest son Yaqub to Fatehpur, but those symbols of submission did not ingratiate the Emperor; the latter insisted upon the ruler's personal presence. Yaqub was present in the Mughal camp when the envoys left for Kashmir. He guessed Akbar's intentions, and fled to the hills. Akbar was in rage, but chose to take no punitive action until the return of his officers.

From Kalanaur one road branched off to Lahore and another to Kabul. Akbar took the latter route. The first major halt thereafter was at Rohtas. Here came Raja Man Singh to make a first-hand report of developments in Kabul. Accompanying him were Hakim's sister Bakht-un-Nissa Begum, and his two sons Qaikabad (15) and Afrasiab (14). The twin sons of Mirza Shahrukhi—Hassan and Hussain—were also in the party. Akbar received the royal repatriates with honour, gave them suitable gifts, and allocated tents to them in his own enclosure. Both Qaikabad and Afrasiab received appropriate ranks in the army. Akbar was happy to know from Man Singh that Kabul was firm in its loyalty, and that the Uzbek Abdullah Khan, on hearing the news of the advance of the Mughal army, had withdrawn his hordes from the vicinity of Kabulistan. The Yusufzais, Mohammads and some other Afghan tribes, as also the Raushanias, were reported to be on the warpath and, according to Man Singh, they needed to be dealt with without mercy. The Emperor took consultations with his commanders, but still held his cards close to the chest. An apprehension lurked in some minds that Akbar intended to singe the Uzbek beard in the latter's own den in Badakhshan. Some commanders doubted the

\*Haidar Mirza is best known as a historian. His *Twarikh-i-Rashidi* is an authentic account of the reign of Babar.

wisdom of stretching the lines of supply and communication to that distance, but none dared express his fears to the Padshah.

Hamida Banu Begum made a dash out of Agra to persuade her unpredictable son out of this seemingly reckless adventure. She caught up with the royal army at Rohtas, and in her own inimical, motherly way impressed upon Akbar the desirability of avoiding the hazards that lay on the other side of Khyber. Akbar listened to her with utmost deference but, to stress that he, not she, was the master, ordered Qasim Khan, commander of the Corps of engineers, to go forward and level the surface of the road to the Indus and thence through the Khyber to Kabul so that it might become passable by wheeled traffic. Many an old Afghan soldier stroked his beard in concern at the perils in which the Emperor was about to involve himself. Akbar was a military genius, not a daredevil outside the limitations of cause and effect. For two weeks, he went behind what Abul Fazl calls the veil of seclusion, thought over the buts and ifs of the planned campaign, drew in his mind a clear picture of the hardships that lay ahead and then came out with a scheme of action as comprehensive as it was immune from the danger of a cataclysmic setback. The army was divided into four equally hard-hitting units: one, under Zain Khan Koka was ordered to proceed to subjugate the gun-happy Yusufzais and Swat; another, under Ismail Quli Khan, was sent "to put a bridle in the mouth of the Baluchis"; the third, under Man Singh, was to go to Kabul to strengthen defences against a possible comeback by the Uzbegs; and, the fourth, under Mirza Shahrukh\* and Raja Bhagwan Das, was commissioned to bring Sultan Yusuf Shah to his knees in Kashmir.

Akbar himself left Rohtas on 19 November and reached the camp at Attock, via Rawalpindi and Hassan Abdal, on 23 December completing the 650-mile journey from Fatehpur-Sikri in sixty-five marches spread over four months and one day—a strikingly slow speed of travel when compared to Akbar's famous darts across

\*Mirza Shahrukh was the grandson of Mirza Sulaiman of Badakhshan. After their defeat at the hands of Abdullah Khan Uzbek, both of them sought refuge at the court of Akbar. Shahrukh was the son of Mirza Ibrahim and Mohtrima Begum, widow of Mirza Kamran. In 1592, he married one of Akbar's daughters (Shukur-un-Nissa Begum) and was raised to the rank of seven thousand. He took an active part in Deccan wars. He also served Jahangir.

deserts in his younger days. The present expedition had not been launched to curb a raging rebellion or contain the territorial ambitions of a fearsome foe; it was, in military terms, a planned move to show the flag, to warn his potential enemies of the consequences of insubordination, and also perhaps to gain further self-confidence by display of such military might as the people of Hindustan had not known before. When Akbar left Fatehpur in August, he had no positive plan of action except the vague one to insulate Punjab from the trouble-torn territories beyond the Khyber. His mind became fixed on certain objectives as he progressed; the leisurely march was in fact a quest for ways to consolidate the empire, to eliminate the enemies by peaceful means if possible or by force if necessary.

The royal camp at Attock became for the time being the capital of the empire. News came here regularly about the successes, and also setbacks, of the imperial army in the four sectors. Akbar sifted the information personally, analyzed and assessed the developing situations, dictated instructions to field commanders, granted interviews to incoming and outgoing messengers, held meetings with his advisers, took important decisions regarding the quantum of troops to be deployed at strategic places—in fact, sitting, at Attock, he remained in full control of operations on all fronts. Even the affairs of Delhi, Agra, Gujarat, Bihar, Bengal and the Deccan were reported to him with rhythmic punctuality; his *sang-froid* and imperturbability became the talk of the camp. Gone were his outbursts of temper and pronouncements of callous punishments for minor offences. He was conducting what Nizam-ud-Din calls the biggest military mission of his career; on it depended the realization of his ambition of being a Vikramaditya, an undisputed master of the whole of Hindustan.

The Yusufzais adopted their customary guerrilla tactics, and gave a rough time to Zain Koka and his army of five thousand well-equipped men. The terrain was against them; so was the weather. The tribal warriors fully made use of their knowledge of the treacherous curves and crevices, and subjected the Mughal army to unending harassment. Heavy snow and piercing winds further added to the woes of the invaders. When their losses in men and material became alarmingly high, the Khan requested the Emperor for reinforcements. Akbar responded by sending a large force (estimated at eight thousand men, one thousand horses and two

hundred elephants under the joint command of Raja Birbal and Hakim Fatehullah Khan. Abul Fazl was an aspirant for the post given to Birbal, and made bold to request the Emperor that he be given an opportunity to prove his loyalty on the battlefield. Akbar did not have the heart to say no to one of his most trusted aides, and at the same time he could not bring himself to cancel without reason a *firman* issued already. A toss-up was agreed upon. Birbal won. Akbar entrusted the joint commanders with the royal standard—a charge which led the Raja and the Hakim to believe that they were being ranked above Zain Khan, and that their decisions were to take precedence over those of the latter. They joined forces with the weary remnants of Zain Khan's men, and worked out a strategy for both immediate and long-term operations. All went well for a while, and the Yusufzais ran for shelter in the inner recesses of the Hindukush. The ambiguity of precedence concerning the ranks of the three commanders, however, soon led to violent conflicts of opinion, and the army found itself without an effective leader. Says Abul Fazl:

The differences between the Raja and Zain Khan took a serious turn; so much so that the former refused an invitation to an entertainment which he offered him. But Kokaltash submitted to all this ill-humour with patience, and then wisely endeavoured to persuade his colleagues to agree on a common plan of action. But they were deaf to all his persuasions, and insisted upon advancing in one body rather than divide the force into two parts—one for penetrating into the hills and the other for consolidating positions already captured. For fear of incurring the Emperor's displeasure, Zain Khan agreed to throw in his lot with the other two. Vanity blinded the Raja to the realities of warfare. Neither he nor Hakim Fatehullah had any experiences of military operation in the hills. Zain Khan, on the other hand, was a master tactician of considerable experience. But he was helpless, and in agreeing to fall in line with amateur commanders, Zain took the road to certain ruination. They organized the army into the customary battle array, and advanced to the Karakar pass on 10 February. Even at this late stage, Kokaltash pleaded with his colleagues against the attack, but in vain. On 14 February they came to the pass and found it so heavily guarded as to be virtually impassable. They were badly repulsed by the Afghans, and elephants, horses and



men were mixed in a wild confusion. The Afghans poured and poured upon them from every side. A large number of the army were slain, many of the bravest fell fighting to the last, while a few only fled. Kokaltash valiantly decided to die on the ground, but one of his friends seized his rein and dragged him from the field. He, at length, reached the camp on foot. The retreat was continued in the darkness of the night. Nearly 5,000 of the imperial troops fell on this sad occasion, among them the most distinguished was Raja Birbal.

Abul Fazl puts the number of the dead at five thousand; other historians estimate that no less than eight thousand men lost their lives in the catastrophe; Zain Koka and Fatehullah Khan were lucky to escape with minor injuries. Both of them hid themselves in a triangular cave for several days before taking the road to Attock. They reached the royal camp on foot and in tatters. Akbar did not receive them for nearly a week; his anguish was too great to be borne with equanimity. The death of Birbal overwhelmed him. For two days and nights he went without food or drink. What made him "shriek with pain" was that the Raja's body was not found. He suspected foul play, and felt that perhaps Zain Khan had him liquidated with the connivance of some of his own men. He sent orders to Kabul and Lahore that no effort should be spared to trace the Raja's body.

A report came from Afghanistan that the Raja had been seen wandering about in the saffron clothes of a darvesh, and that the shame of the defeat prevented him from coming to the court. Akbar decided to go himself in disguise to check the veracity of this information, but his advisers, among them Abul Fazl and Faizi, dissuaded him from undertaking the hazardous exploration. Then came a news from Lahore that a man, bearing a marked resemblance to Birbal, was seen giving hair-cuts to peasants on the western bank of the Jhelum. Akbar went into a rage at the inaction of his officers, and sent an urgent command to the Governor:

I am distressed that you did not detain the man who, according to reports reaching me, is an exact replica of Birbal. Contact him immediately, and send him to the camp with a strong military escort. I would impress upon you once again that Raja Birbal was not only a commander of our forces; he was a per-

sonal friend of rare loyalty and devotion. Men like him are born once in a million years. I expect you to leave no stone unturned to find him. I am convinced he is alive.

To save himself from further queries, the Governor submitted in reply that the identity of the "barber" had been verified; he was not Birbal, though the facial resemblance was undoubtedly striking. Akbar was in acute distress at the mystery which enveloped the disappearance of one who had been a partner not only in his intellectual quests, but also in his joys and sorrows over the last two decades. Their friendship, to quote Nizam-ud-Din, transcended the disparities of age\* and status and religion. A sparkling wit was Birbal's biggest asset. This gift, combined with his high proficiency in Persian and Hindi languages, endeared him to the Emperor. A poet of no mean talents, Birbal often sang his own compositions on special occasions, and won praise for the richness of his words and voice. Vincent Smith calls him a court jester, and thus betrays a singular lack of understanding of the stuff Birbal was made of. It was to Birbal that Akbar turned for advice on contentious affairs of the state, and invariably found the Raja's views constructive and above partisanship. It would be a poor reflection on Akbar's judgment of men and their capacities had he appointed a mere buffoon to the command of an important military campaign. Smith's sneer is perhaps derived from the writings of Abdul Qadir Badaouni who could see no virtue in anyone who was not born a Muslim; the latter was a narrow-minded religionist who made history the tool of his bigotry. "Birbal entered the park of the dogs of hell"—this was the manner in which he described the disappearance of the Raja. It is surprising that Western historians should put their trust in the opinions of a man so vile and vindictive.

The setback suffered at the hands of Yusufzais stirred Akbar to wage a total war against the rebel Afghan tribes. With a view to lead the imperial army himself, he crossed the Indus and the Kabul rivers, but in the end he was persuaded to entrust the "operation revenge" to Raja Todar Mal and Prince Murad. The former, knowing full well the handicaps of a joint command, sub-

\*Raja Birbal was born in a Brahmin family of Kalpi in 1528. His original name was Mahesh Dass.

mitted discreetly that the Prince should not be exposed to the hazards of mountain warfare. Akbar read the Raja's thoughts correctly, and cancelled the appointment of Murad. Todar Mal proceeded with extreme circumspection, built forts as he progressed, avoided frontal attacks on Afghan positions, resorted to scorch-earth tactics of the Uzbegs, and succeeded in inflicting heavy losses on the enemy.

At this stage, the Raushanias made a common cause with the Yusufzais in a bid to stop the imperialists from consolidating their gains in the area. Akbar was somewhat alarmed at this development, and recalled Raja Man Singh, known to all as a man of the crisis, from Kabul, and sent him with a large, mobile force to lend a hand to Todar Mal in Swat and the neighbouring territories. According to Abul Fazl, the two veteran Hindu commanders scored many spectacular victories against the rebels, the greatest of them all being the one fought by Man Singh at the Khyber pass. Bayazid's\* son, 14-year-old Jalal-ud-Did (known all over as Jalala) fought with the frenzy of the demon, and succeeded in making good his escape when it became clear that the Mughal assault could not be contained. "This torch of terror," wrote Nizam-ud-Din, "continued to blaze till 1600 when it was blown out by a whiff from the merciful Allah." Jalala became a legend in his lifetime. On the battlefield, the bones of his father, Bayazid, used to be carried before him in a jar, and woe befell the enemy who made an attempt to deprive him of what he considered to be the symbol of his faith and resolution. Though humiliated, the Afghans were far from being subjugated. They carried war against the Mughals to the reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan, and thence to the period of British rule in India. The Pushtoons are today a thorn in the side of Pakistan. Their creed is war, and the gun is their instrument to realize themselves. They value their independence as a gift from God, a sacred trust to be safeguarded at all costs.

Akbar withdrew to Lahore after seventy-two days' eventful stay at Attock. His mission was partly fulfilled. The threat of an Afghan or Uzbeg incursion into Punjab was blocked for the time being. Zabulistan\*\* was firmly in his hands. However, he paid a

\*Bayazid Ansari, founder of the Raushania sect had died in 1585, and was succeeded by his son Jalala.

\*\*Zabulistan was another name for Kabulistan.

heavy price for the advantages gained. The biggest of them all was the death of Raja Birbal. He would have gladly sacrificed another eight thousand men of his army to recover the body of his poet and philosopher friend. Akbar was never the same again after the disappearance of Birbal. It is a sad landmark in life when the friends of one's youth begin to die.

Stymied by a thorny problem, most men in authority tend to get ruffled and complain to God about the injustices of His dispensations. Akbar was not made of this mould. He would take on both man and nature—even the Great God Himself—to get over the hurdles in his way. The elder son of Yusuf Shah, Yaqub Shah, stood menacingly between him and capture of Kashmir. Fiercely independent, this young man of twenty-seven used every known device to halt the assault on the assault mounted by Raja Bhagwan Das and Mirza Shahrukh. He countered the Mughal superiority in numbers and equipment by a greater mobility and stirring appeals to his men in the names of freedom and nationalism. Kashmiri soldiers would suddenly come down the high hills like roaring waterfalls, carry everything before them, and then disappear as quickly as they came. The top-heavy Mughal force, with all its elephants and guns, found it difficult to cope with Yaqub's tactics. The narrow roads and passes, as also the inclemency of weather were the foes the invaders were hard put to it to contain. Bhagwan Das requested the Emperor for contingents of sappers and miners and also road-cutters, bridge-builders and scouts with intimate knowledge of the hills that guarded Kashmir. Akbar's reply was typical: "Battles are won more by will-power than by weapons. Push on, heedless of losses. Reinforcements are on the way. The next Nauroz festival will be held in Srinagar. Good luck."

Muhammad Qasim, the builder of Agra fort, was sent at the head of a corps of engineers to assist the Raja. The latter pressed forward, as commanded, against heavy odds. Yusuf Shah panicked, and offered to negotiate a treaty acknowledging Akbar as his overlord. Both he and Yaqub came to the Raja's camp, swore allegiance, and asked for stoppage of hostilities. "Ours is a land of gods; its beauty and peace are nature's treasures without parallel. War cries and the sound of guns do not mix with the celestial tranquillity that prevails here. I do not want this ancient country to be devastated by warfare. Let the Emperor be the protector of its natural splendour. I will go to the court to offer my submission

to Akbar Padshah."

Bhagwan Das was touched by these sentiments. He accepted the offer, and drew up a treaty according to which the *fatwa* was to be read and coins struck in Akbar's name. In addition, certain key manufactures\* of the state were to be controlled by officers appointed by the Emperor. The concordat did not please Akbar. He ordered Bhagwan Das to continue the march and capture Srinagar as planned. Both Yusuf Shah and his son were to be sent to the court with a strong military escort.

Fearing that Akbar wanted to humiliate them, Yaqub used the age-old tactic of fleeing in the guise of a priest. Yusuf Shah was brought to Attock by Raja Bhagwan Das and Mirza Shahrukh. Akbar received the ruler with courtesy. When questioned as to the reason of his ingratitude, Yusuf hung his head in shame and kept silent. Akbar, pleased with this implied admission of guilt, was inclined to restore Kashmir to him. Some top counsellors, however, represented that it would not be advisable to hand over the territory to him before Srinagar was captured and [the *khutba* read in the Emperor's name. Akbar agreed. Yusuf Shah was detained more or less as a prisoner, and Bhagwan Das was ordered to continue operations till Srinagar was actually in Mughal possession. The Rajput commander read in this command a breach of the treaty he had signed and, to vindicate his honour, stabbed himself in the chest shortly after returning to his post. Akbar was much upset over this development, and sent two of his personal *hakims*—one Muslim and another Hindu—to attend on the Raja. Though his life was saved, Bhagwan Das lost for ever the vigour and daredevilry that distinguished him on the battlefield. Todar Mal was recalled from Swat, and appointed to the command of the expedition in Kashmir. Using controlled aggression, the Raja braved many perils to hoist the Mughal flag atop Yusuf's palace in Srinagar in mid-1586. Yaqub surrendered. Both he and his father, Yusuf Shah, were later sent to Bihar to serve under Raja Man Singh. The latter was appointed Governor of the eastern provinces—Bengal, Bihar and Orissa—early in 1586, and achieved the high distinction of becoming an Amir of the rank of seven thousand; his adoptive father, Raja Bhagwan Das, became Amirul-

\*Saffron, silks and furs were the manufactures to be controlled by officers appointed by the Mughal Government.

Umra, but his mansab did not go higher than that of five thousand. Though Man Singh lived in Ajmer for the best part of his remaining years, he ruled the eastern segment of the empire virtually as an independent sovereign. He died in the ninth year of the reign of Jahangir. Many historians describe him as the sword-arm of Akbar; he was more than a mere warrior. But for him, the principle of equality of religions, which became the crowning glory of Akbar's reign, might never have become a reality. His pen was as powerful as his spear.

Three years after making Kashmir a *suba* of the Kingdom, Akbar went there with all his wives, all his sons, and all the paraphernalia of the Mughal court. Nearly ten thousand workmen preceded the royal cavalcade, building roads and bridges, clearing jungles, pinpointing sites for camps, constructing wood-and-brick rest houses for shelter against rain and snow, and making underground depots for storage of food and other essentials for a royal holiday. Prince Murad was in charge of the ladies' camp. At Bhimbar, a high velocity blizzard disrupted arrangements, caused heavy landslides, uprooted tents and, consequently, the young chaperon decided that the going would be rough for the ladies and that they should stay put where they were till the return of the Emperor. Akbar was at the time at Naushera, two stages ahead. He was beside himself with rage when told of the halt called by Murad, and decided to go himself to escort the ladies but, at the advice of Fatehullah Khan, entrusted the job to Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. The latter deployed a force of over a thousand workmen to clear the road, repair bridges, and thus succeeded in uniting "the chaste ones of the realm" with Emperor before the descent to the valley began. Abul Fazl uses exotic words and phrases to describe the reunion, and brings to play all his linguistic skill and vocabulary to draw colourful pictures of the fauna and flora that made Kashmir "a paradise more splendidous than the paradise itself." The royal party reached Srinagar on 3 June 1589, covering a distance of nearly two hundred miles from Lahore in twenty-four stages. Akbar chose the palace of Yusuf Shah for his stay in Srinagar, and ordered a thousand "floating palaces" to be built for excursions in the lakes. For thirty-nine days, Akbar roamed about in the valley like an inquisitive pilgrim. The wealth of trees, flowers, fruit and water fascinated him. To quote Abul Fazl, "he saw God wherever he went, and came to be-

lieve more strongly than ever before that spirit, not matter, was the ultimate reality." In awe and humility, he gazed at the sun, the moon and the stars, and prayed that he be granted the capacity to understand and appreciate their mysteries. Here Akbar merged himself with the Creator, and realized that social unity was only the exterior of the spiritual oneness that underlay and sustained the cosmos. Here was the enlightenment that gave a new meaning to his programme of reform, and convinced him that God did not create man to accentuate the differences of religion; rather, religion could be a powerful means to strengthen the harmonies visible all round. Like empiricists before and after him, Akbar used the scientific method for his researches, but in the end came to the conclusion that the instruments of geometry were helpless beyond a point, and that a stage came after which the vast unknown could be comprehended only by submission to His will. Kashmir chastened him. He returned to Lahore, via Kabul, early in 1590. Then began a new era of reform. The change that had come over him found expression in many an overt and covert way.

The return journey from Srinagar was marred by the passing away of Hakim Fatehullah Khan and Amir Abul Fateh, both admired by Akbar for their learning and loyalty. To quote from *Mirat-ul-Alam*, the former, a Shi'ite from Shiraz, "was a worldly man who often accompanied the Emperor on hunting parties with a rifle on his shoulder and a powderkeg in his waist-band, performing feats of strength such as Rustam could not have performed." He held the prestigious post of *Sadr* for many years before his death. He fell ill shortly after reaching Srinagar. The royal physicians strove hard to save his life, but in vain. Akbar was stricken with grief, and told Abul Fazl: "He was my confidant, my philosopher, my physician and my astrologer. If he had fallen in the hands of the Uzbeks, I would have given all my treasures to ransom him, and would have gained by the bargain." He was buried near Srinagar, on *Takht-i-Sulaiman*.

Amir Abul Fateh was another of the circle of the Emperor's close friends. He died on 14 August at Dantir on Kashmir's border with Punjab, and Akbar ordered that his body should be carried to Hassan Abdal for burial in a tomb which the deceased had built for himself. Abul Fazl narrates in touching words the story of Akbar's visits to the tent of the Amir while the latter was

on his death bed:

On one such occasion, His Majesty's eyes became wet, and in a heavy voice he asked his friend to overcome his pain with the instrument of faith. The Emperor sat on his bed, held his hand in a gesture of eternal friendship, comforted him with soothing words and, on leaving, instructed the physicians in attendance to spare no effort to prevent the angel of death from entering the tent. The end came shortly afterwards. Akbar lamented: 'The heavens have fallen; my world is in ruins. Oh, Allah, what sin did I commit to merit losing two dear friends in two months. Save me, the Protector of the bereaved, from further such catastrophes.

Akbar's prayer was not to be granted. At Kabul he received a petition from Raja Todar Mal, Governor of Punjab, for permission to lay down his office and spend the last days of his life in Hardwar. Akbar knew that the Raja was in indifferent health, and so agreed to his request. Todar Mal handed over his duties, as desired in the royal *firman*, to Raja Bhagwan Das, and left for the city "whose gates open into the courtyard of Hindu heaven." When he had travelled only one stage, a letter came from the Emperor which stated:

It is immeasurably more virtuous to look after one's duties than to sit aimlessly on the bank of the Ganges. Even Hindu *dharma* enjoins the observance of one's worldly duties to the end. In our opinion it would be more beneficial for you to return to Lahore and derive Divine beneficence by continuing to work for the good of the people.

True to his salt, Todar Mal, notwithstanding his age and illness, returned to his post. His premonition came true. On 14 November he died following a stroke. The news saddened Akbar. One more shock was yet in store for him. Five days later passed away the gallant Raja Bhagwan Das, brother of Empress Jodha Bai and hero of many a war he fought side by side with Akbar. The cup of the Emperor's sorrow was now full to the brim. He was forty-eight, an age reached by few monarchs of the Chingez-Timur dynasty. The thought of death saddened him. His life-work, he



felt, was not yet finished.

The passing away of the three Rajas—Birbal, Bhagwan Das and Todar Mal—left in Akbar's life a void too wide and deep to be filled easily. Not only were they servants of extreme devotion and loyalty; they were the symbols of the socio-religious ideals Akbar cherished. The trio were the pillars of a bridge that Akbar built to bring Hindus and Muslims together, and thus to break down the barriers between religions and races.

Todar Mal, like Birbal, was of a comparatively low descent, and it was through sheer merit that he reached the highest office in the empire. His native Oudh was in a state of chronic confusion when he attained the age of adolescence and became aware of the grim poverty of the tillers of the soil. In every post he held—ranging from a petty clerk to that of Prime Minister—he applied himself to discover the causes of the sufferings of the common man and to find out ways to lighten his burden. He became the author of a land revenue system based upon exact measurements of holdings and uniformity in assessment of Government dues—the two requisites for a fair deal both to the peasantry and the state. The name Todar Mal has become synonymous with skill in accountancy, and even to this day the tales of his genius are told in songs sung by the village folk at the time of harvest. He and Birbal are the two figures that give the reign of Akbar the touch of a legend. Although Abul Fazl often criticized Todar Mal for his "bone-deep bigotry" and "tyrannical exactingness," he observes: "He was the unique of the age for uprightness, straightforwardness, courage, knowledge of affairs, and the administration of India. A wound was given to disinterested work by his death, and the market of business lost its briskness."

Akbar was grieved beyond words. To have lost five companions-in-ideals within a short span of time was a blow too heavy to be endured with philosophic calm. As was his custom, he mourned these deaths with impositions of rigorous self-discipline; for forty-one days he touched neither meat nor set his lips to a cup of wine.

The agony of these losses was, however, counterbalanced to some extent by the pleasure of new acquisitions in the form of grandsons and granddaughters. Between 1586 and 1590, Salim fathered two sons and three daughters and Murad one son. The (Parvez by the daughter of Khwaja Hassan, paternal uncle of

Mirza Aziz Koka); the daughters Sultan Khirad (by the daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das), Affat Banu (by the daughter of Mirza Aziz Koka) and Daulat Nisa\* (by the daughter of Darya Malbhas, a minor Raja at the foot of hills near Lahore) were born in 1586, 1589 and 1590, respectively. The son of Murad (Rustam by the daughter of Mirza Aziz) was born in 1581.

The births of sons were celebrated with traditional Mughal lust for pageantry and merry making; in addition, thanks were given to Allah by way of round-the-clock prayers, feeding of the poor, release of prisoners, announcement of concessions to slaves, prohibition of slaughter of animals for the remaining days of the month, remittances of land revenue in some states and the like. Festivities on the birth of daughters were in a lower key. Although Akbar disregarded tradition by welcoming the birth of female children with gaiety and benevolence not known in the previous generations, yet he too was partial to male progeny. Like Babar and Humayun, he was obsessed with the desire to assure unbroken lineage for the house of Timur.

Before returning to Lahore, Akbar did homage in Kabul at the shrine of his grandfather Babar, and also spent many hours at the tomb of his uncle Hindal. Though Akbar was essentially a man of the present, the past to him was not a forgotten chapter. Visits to mausoleums of saints and seers, as also of his relatives, were occasions for him to reflect on their achievements and to remind himself of his own obligations to posterity. At times he would spend days praying and meditating at the tomb of a holy man and transport himself to the realm of spiritual imponderables. He remained a searcher after truth till the end of his day. The glory of an empire stretching across the entire breadth of Hindustan did not make him oblivious of the transitoriness of life and impermanence of material wealth.

As has already been stated, Kashmir enchanted Akbar; memories of his visit there aroused in him the desire to make Srinagar his summer capital. The time, however, was not yet ripe for that score, as given by Abul Fazl, credits Prince Salim with presenting His Majesty with "the priceless gifts of grandsons" in 1587 (Khusrau by the daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das) and 1589 innovation. The shadow of Abdullah Khan fell ominously over

\*Daulat Nisa lived only for seven months.

Punjab, and this circumstance necessitated the Emperor's stay in Lahore till such time as the Uzbek threat had passed. Nevertheless, he found time to revisit the "valley of gods" in 1592 and again in 1597. Each time he travelled via Pir Panjal, and was accompanied by a segment of his seraglio, and also by his sons and chosen Amirs.

At Srinagar in September 1592 Akbar married the daughter of Shamas Khan Kak; Abul Fazl describes her as a "rose-bud of chastity resplendent in the virtues given her by God." With a view to "further integrating the Mughal royalty with the aristocracy of Kashmir," Akbar permitted Prince Salim to take into his harem the daughter of Mubarak Khan Kak; she too was "a gem of the purest ray serene whose lustre put the moon to shame." With new Kashmiri brides in their harems, Akbar and Salim made plans to spend the winter in the valley, but intense cold following a spell of unprecedented snowfall compelled a change of decision. The news from across the Khyber seemed also to influence the Emperor. After declaring Kashmir a crownland, and placing it under the charge of Khwaja Shams-ud-Din, Akbar left for Lahore on 31 October. The 600-mile journey, beset occasionally by heavy snowfall and landslides, was completed in fifty-eight days.

Arrival in Lahore on 29 December was a noisy drum-and-naqara affair. As was his custom, Akbar entered "a city draped in phulkaris" at the head of a glittering cavalcade of cavalry and war elephants. The population gave him a touching welcome; cries of Allah-hu-Akbar rent the air as a squadron of famous tuskers raised their trunks to salute him at the gate of the fort; it seemed as if the Mughal dynasty was a flower of the soil of Hindustan itself, and that Akbar was a king rooted in Aryan traditions and culture.

The third and last visit to Kashmir in 1597 was more an expression of Akbar's political ambition than a mere outing for pleasure and relaxation. From Srinagar he sent ambassadors to Little and Great Tibet, ostensibly a gesture of goodwill but in fact a reminder to the Chinese rulers that their territory was within the reach of the Mughal arms. But for the show of insubordination at this stage by his sons, Akbar might have decided to extend his sphere of influence to areas on the other side of the Himalayas. The lust for conquest, like other lusts, is an appetite

that has no point of satiation; one conquest leads to another, then another till there are no more territories to be conquered. Like other great conquerors, Akbar realized the futility of it all not before he saw the angel of death hovering over his head. Tibet and Turan eluded his grasp. Time was not on his side. The ninety days he spent in Kashmir was a period of stock-taking, of communion with himself and to ascertain the Divine will which he believed sustained him. He returned to Lahore refreshed, ready to silence with a firm hand the voices of disobedience from the distant Sultanates of the south. What was more, he was determined to bring to their knees the royal princes known to be straining at the leash to wage a full-scale war to decide as to who would rule Hindustan after his death.

There is invariably a gap between what one is and what others think he is. The world knows Akbar to be a great conqueror and administrator; he was much more besides. Akbar's disputations with himself are a saga of inner conflict which has yet to be placed in its proper perspective. Many historians have referred to his secret dialogues with the Deity, but none has attempted to reconstruct a credible picture of what exactly transpired inside his mercurial mind. Abul Fazl often goes behind the scenes to read Akbar's mind, but he is too servile a chronicler to be worthy of credence in matters related directly to the personality of the Emperor. Abdul Qadir Badaouni goes to the other extreme; he loses trustworthiness because of his purblind religious fanaticism. His virulent criticisms of Akbar's experiments with tolerance are so one-sided as to make his testimony totally unreliable. Few others have attempted an analysis of Akbar's mind.

Akbar's campaign in the north-west was marked by acts of unmatched heroism by Mirza Aziz Koka,\* Rajas Man Singh, Todar Mal and Bhagwan Das, Amir Abul Fateh and Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. It is surprising that Akbar himself took no part in actual fighting at any front. He remained entrenched at Attock for over three months. After the death of Birbal in fighting against the Yusufzais, he moved out in rage to take the field himself against the elusive tribal foe, but he was persuaded

\*Mirza Aziz Koka won twenty-three battles against the Yusufzais and Raushanias before he asked for reinforcements to strike a knockout blow against the dissident tribes.

to return to the camp without taking part in an engagement. This was certainly unlike the Akbar of younger days when, heedless of advices to the contrary, he invariably jumped into the thick of fighting at the slightest provocation. Gone were the days when Akbar moved with lightning speed to suppress a revolt or avenge an insult. He had lost some of his earlier gusto; the impetuosity of youth had given place willy-nilly to a degree of caution that smacked somewhat of irresolution. Although at Attock he held in his hands the reins of operations in four sectors, yet the fact remained that he chose not to expose himself to the hazards of mountain warfare. He would not perhaps have taken that course when the blood in his veins was a little hotter and flowed at a proportionately higher pressure. Compulsions of age are universal; they make no discrimination between a Padshah and a peasant.

## War in the South

Akbar was forty-eight when he returned to Lahore after a spectacular show of his armed might across the Indus. Though not wholly subdued, the tribesmen and Uzbek chiefs realized that the Mughal military power was not to be trifled with. They recognized that the Punjab was a heavily guarded citadel of the empire, and that their guns and horses were no match for the heavy armament and war elephants of Akbar's forces.

Akbar had reason to be satisfied with the result of his campaign. He could now devote his time to the work of consolidation. However, the Deccan beckoned him. The Shia Sultanates flaunted their independence, and they seemed to have set their faces against acknowledging Akbar as their suzerain. This was an affront that Akbar found hard to swallow. He knew that Ala-ud-Din Khilji (1293-94) and later Ghias-ud-Din Tughlak (1338) had crossed the Narbada and subdued the Sultans. Stories of their conquests sharpened Akbar's ambitions. The diamonds of Golkonda, the pearls of Mannar, the sandalwood and spices of the coasts—not to mention the fabulous wealth hoarded in the forts of Ahmednagar, Bijapur and Khandesh—these were the lures which proved irresistible. In addition, accounts of the splendour of the court at Gulbarga fired Akbar's imagination. Akbar had heard that the great Persian poet Hafiz had planned to visit Gulbarga at the invitation of Mahmud I (1400 A.D.), and that he was forced to turn back because of a violent hurricane that hit his ship. This further increased Akbar's curiosity; that the history of Deccan was

linked with the history of Persia\* and other countries of Transoxiana was good enough reason for him to make it an appendage of Delhi.

The great Bahmini\*\* dynasty—Sunni Afghans—came to a close in 1518, after 171 years' rule in Deccan. On its ruins rose the kingdoms of Bijapur, Golconda, Ahmednagar, Bidar and Berar. Following the defeat of the Hindu ruler of Vijayanagar, Ram Raja, by the combined forces of the Sultanates in 1564, there came into existence in the lower valley of the Tapti the small independent state of Khandesh under the rule of a family of Arab descent. Raja Ali, who was at one time a nobleman at Akbar's court in Agra, was its ruler in 1590 when Akbar contemplated the sending of an expedition to the south. He was a worldly-wise individual, having no inflated ideas about the virtues of independence, patriotism, human dignity and the like. He knew Akbar first hand, and did not underestimate the strength and reach of the Mughal army. He acknowledged Akbar as his overlord, and even undertook, if need be, to make a common cause with the Mughals against the Sultanates. This alliance encouraged Akbar, and he quickly launched a diplomatic offensive to gain his end, if possible, by peaceful means. Abul Faiz Faizi was chosen to lead a delegation to Deccan; his mandate was to use his persuasive skills to bring around the Sultanates "to agree to hold power in the name of His Exalted Majesty, and thus to help integrate Hindustan into a political and social unity."

For two years, Faizi shuttled from one capital to another, but was unable to convince the Sultans that their good lay in subservience to the Emperor. Raja Ali was the only exception; he left Faizi in no doubt about his allegiance to Akbar. Muhammad Qasim Farishta describes at length the "abject servility that the Raja displayed in prostrating himself seven times before the symbolic throne on which was placed a cushion along with the royal insignia." In front of the throne "Ali sat dutifully for three hours praying for Divine assistance in the task which was assigned to him."

\*The Shi'ite population of Deccan were the descendants of immigrants from Persia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They came to India via the western ports.

\*\*The Bahmini dynasty was founded by Hassan Shah Ganga in the fifteenth century. Hassan was the servant of a Brahmin astrologer, Ganga.

Subservience could not have taken a more obedient look.

Akbar was resolved to use force only as the last resort. Circumstances necessitated a policy of caution. Jalala's reappearance in Kabulistan and continued plunderings by Abdullah Khan and his son Munim Khan in Turan caused concern in Lahore. Akbar moved quickly to restore order in what Badaouni called his unprotected backyard. Qasim Khan was sent to Kabul to defuse a minor revolt by the Raushanias, and Prince Daniyal was entrusted with the more difficult task of scotching the Uzbek menace in Qandhar. Both these expeditions were successful in achieving their limited objectives. Jalala took to the hills at the approach of Qasim Khan, and Daniyal gave a jolt to the prestige of Abdullah by capturing the comparatively fertile regions of Zamindawar and Garamsir.

The Uzbek chief, however, continued to be a threat to Akbar till his death in 1598. Towards the end of his life, he had the audacity to ask for the hand of Akbar's daughter in marriage. The proposal was turned down with a show of contempt. The Emperor asked Abul Fazl to tell the Khan firmly that his suggestion was a piece of insolence that could in no way be entertained. Abul Fazl wrote:

Matrimonial alliances are a means to develop friendships; they should never be used as traps to obtain hostages. To His Majesty, his daughters are a sacred trust; they cannot be sent to the enemy camp in the vain hope that by some quirk of fortune the alliance may turn out to be a happy one. Uzbek hostility to the house of Timur is a fact of history that cannot be ignored. In case the Khan contemplates a change of heart, the first step would be for him to kiss the stirrup of the Emperor's glory. Thereafter the Benefactor of Humanity (Akbar) may in his wisdom consider the practicability of the proposal.

The insult sent Abdullah into a fit of rage that culminated in a fierce Uzbek assault on imperial territories around Kabul. Akbar observed that the raid was "a small man's act of vengeance," and ordered Qasim Khan to take suitable retaliatory action. The counter-attack knocked out nearly two thousand men led by Munim Khan. This was perhaps the last Uzbek engagement with Mughal troops before the death of Abdullah.

Though the Deccan obsessed him, Akbar was unwilling to take



any military action in a hurry. He sent three more goodwill delegations—one each to Ahmednagar, Bijapur and Golconda—to impress upon the Sultans the inevitability of war if they refused to accept him as their suzerain. The envoys failed in their mission. Akbar then initiated steps to raise a large army and to deploy trustworthy commandants in states and principalities through which lay the route to Deccan. First, Prince Murad was made Governor of Malwa, but he was later shifted to the strategically more important state of Gujarat. The Governor's post in Malwa was given to Shahrukh Mirza whose rise to this top position came after his marriage with Akbar's daughter Shukr-un-Nissa Begum.

Akbar was in the habit of giving lengthy verbal briefings to appointees to high independent administrative positions. The advice given by him to Prince Murad before his departure for Ahmedabad reflects clearly Akbar's priorities and the value he attached to moral integrity. Abul Fazl records the following summary of the Emperor's exhortation to the Prince:

It is important that action is taken after careful thought. In eating, clothing, sleeping and walking, men should seek to increase wisdom, and not the fattening of the body, or pleasure. In governing, the idea should be to protect the feeble from the strong arm of oppression. Improvement of the country and the army should be advanced. Company should always be kept with the good. Do not associate with praters, loquacious persons, drunkards, foulmouthed persons, buffoons, bad-hearted men, base people, the envious, ignorant sellers of wisdom, handsome youths and young women.

Do not turn away from the bitter disposition of the truthful and be not angry with them. Nor be vexed on account of the superior enlightenment of the well-intentioned. Consider abundance of well-wishing as an ornament of dominion, not as a reason for neglect. Judge nobility of caste and high birth from the personality, and not goodness from grand-fathers, or greatness from the seed.

Study the daily doings and manners of your companions. Be intent in prayer. Do not let reprisals pass beyond bounds, and do not attend to such matters when angry or hungry. Be not offended by diversity of religion. Struggle hard to sit in the shade of peace with all. Do not stain your soul with revenge.

Do not take the path of deceit when inflicting retribution. Keep secrets to yourself, and except to one or two right-thinking and profound persons do not reveal your thoughts. Do not refer deliberation to an unsuitable assemblage. First, inquire separately and then in full meeting. Do not indicate your (private) advisor.

Do not distress the relation, the intimate and the neighbour by angry glances. If a thing can be remedied by kindness, do not have recourse to terror. Do not seek the destruction of the fallen, nor follow up the flying. Do not open the lips to utter oaths. Receive warning from others, not from oneself. Whoever gathers wisdom from the teaching of the world learns without the learner's pain.

Forget not any one who does you service, and strive to recompense it. Postpone not to the morrow the work of today. Reckon a good name as eternal life. Keep aloof from jesting, and toying, especially with one who is higher (or older) than yourself.

Regard the shining sword and the pen as the two arms of power. Commit the first to the brave and frank-hearted, and the second to the contented and right-acting. Soldiers get a great name by four things: first, loyalty to their master; second, love to their comrades; third, obedience; fourth, experience. The general is famed who always looks after the pay, the arms and the cattle of his followers, and who is always prepared. And he wins their hearts by gifts and honours, and looks after the survivors of deceased soldiers.

The moral prescriptions were too severe to be followed in their entirety by anyone, especially by the 23-year-old Murad whose love of pleasure had already degenerated into the vilest type of debauchery. Akbar was not unaware of his son's weaknesses, in particular his addiction to wine and opium, but he hoped that the hazards of war in a distant land would chasten him and arouse in him the martial virtues associated with the house of Timur.

Akbar was destined to be disappointed; his expectation came to naught not long after the Prince was ordered to join forces with Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan for an assault on Ahmednagar. Hesitant to move out of his love-nests, Murad dilly-dallied and left Ahmedabad on 30 October 1594, only after Akbar sent him an angry letter detailing the consequences of delay and disobedience.

The prince and the Khan-i-Khanan did not click right from

the beginning. If the one said he wanted to stop for a breather, the other would enumerate a thousand reasons for pressing on with the march. A camp site chosen by one was immediately rejected as worthless by the other. Each doubted the other's motives. The Prince suspected the Khan to be at heart a supporter of the Shi'ite Sultans of Deccan. He never forgot that Abdur Rahim was the son of Bairam Khan, a Shi'ite from Persia who, during the period of his ascendancy, tried his best to whittle down the influence of Sunni Muslims at the court.

The Khan, on his part, considered Murad to be a mere playboy, totally unconversant with the art of warfare. His efforts to instil in Murad a sense of urgency failed miserably. The differences came to a head over the route to be taken by the army. The Khan preferred to make his way to the south via Malwa. Murad, on the other hand, stressed the advantages of taking the road that passed through Gujarat. In the end, the Khan sacrificed his judgment to placate the "whims of a drunkard." When the imperialists pitched their tents a few miles outside Ahmednagar, the two were hardly on speaking terms. Murad spent most of his time drinking in the company of a bevy of concubines and dancing girls. It looked as if the expedition was doomed for a dismal defeat.

Being an experienced and resourceful general, Abdur Rahim followed the line of the least resistance, let Murad amuse himself with his cup and concubines, and proceeded to lay seige to the well-fortified city. For three months, he battled against the enemy defences to force a breakthrough, but in vain. The defenders led by Sultana Chand Bibi put up a heroic resistance. At one stage when the fall of the city looked imminent, she came out in man's clothes, sword in hand, and moved forward majestically to exhort her forces to fight on till victory was won. Her courage so inspired her followers that they with one voice swore to win glory either by victory or through martyrdom. The day was saved, and the Sultana became a legend in Indian history. By birth a Nizamshahi of Ahmednagar,\* she was the childless widow of Ali Adilshah of

\*Chand Bibi was the daughter of Burhan Nizamshah of Ahmednagar. To strengthen the alliance with the house of Bijapur, he gave her in marriage to Ali Adilshah. In reciprocation Adilshah's sister, Hadiya Sultana, was given as a consort to Murtaza Shah, eldest son of Hussain Nizamshah.

Bijapur—a duel status that lent her bravery a look of patriotism transcending the jealousies and conflicts that weakened the two kingdoms. She checkmated every move by the Mughal generals, and threatened to go on the offensive when it became known that the requested reinforcements from Bijapur were on the way. Despairing of victory, the Khan-i-Khanan made overtures for peace. The Sultana's resolution paid off. She clinched the negotiations by ceding Berar to the Mughals; in lieu the Khan-i-Khanan recognized the child Bahadur Khan,\* grandson of Burhan-ul-Mulk, as king of Ahmednagar. The treaty was a diplomatic triumph for Chand Bibi in that it affirmed tacitly the sovereignty of Ahmednagar; there was no provision therein that the king would hold power in the name of the Emperor. To Chand Bibi independence was everything, the worldly riches nothing. When Akbar came to know of the deal, his reaction was one of anger and disappointment. He had not sent a mighty force across the Narbada to sign off his ambition to be the master of the whole of Hindustan. "It was an unworthy pact," wrote Abul Fazl.

For the second time Akbar's dream of bringing the whole of Hindustan under his rule received a setback. In 1586 Aziz Koka, ordered to conquer the south, was asked to retrace his steps because of the threat of rebellions in the north-west. This was more galling because victory looked well within the Mughal grasp. It distressed the Emperor to see one of his top generals humbled by one whom he described as a vain woman. His indignation turned into rage when he listened to despatches from Prince Murad accusing the Khan-i-Khanan of secret complicity with the enemy. "It is no secret," the Prince wrote:

that the Khan at heart is a Shi'ite. His sympathies have always been with the Sultans who profess the Shia faith. The siege of Ahmednagar was a stage-act to deceive the Emperor. Negotiations for peace were opened at a time when the enemy were at the verge of unconditional surrender. My advice to the contrary was not heeded. I beg to submit most respectfully that the military talents of the Khan-i-Khanan should be used in regions other than the Deccan. Religious loyalty seems to have warped

\*Bahadur Khan was the son of Ibrahim who succeeded Burhan-ul-Mulk as King of Ahmednagar in 1595.

his judgment. In my humble opinion the sooner he is recalled to the court the better it will be for the cause of unity Your Majesty cherishes so dearly.

Akbar was in a dilemma. To recall the Khan-i-Khanan immediately was to admit defeat, and to do otherwise was to allow Murad's known differences with the Khan to take an uglier turn. He chose to let the sleeping dogs lie, and waited for a suitable opportunity to recall them both. His reply to Murad was brief and firm:

Your observation that unity is dear to me is correct. For the last two score years I have been obsessed with the idea of bringing about socio-religious oneness in this country. This goal, in my view, will for ever remain a distant dream unless the whole of Hindustan is brought under one rule. The expedition to the Deccan was a step towards the realization of this objective. The first results, howsoever modest, are a gain and, in our view, these will prove in the end to be a major contribution to the success of the Mughal arms. Our instructions for further action will be sent shortly. In the meantime, it is important that the army should be kept in good heart and cheer.

Little did Akbar know at this stage that his stars were in disarray, and that for the remaining years of his life he was to engage in a soul-searing scuffle with continuing misfortune. The death of Murad's nine-year old son, Rustam,\* was the curtain-raiser for the shape of things to come. He loved his grandsons dearly, in particular the chubby-faced, big-boned Rustam, and spent most of his leisure hours in their company. As the royal physician Ali hung his head and stood listlessly when the Emperor inquired about the health of the ailing child, Akbar thundered: "No, no, it cannot be true. No one can snatch away my Rustam from me. Bring him to life." The wailings of the ladies coming out from the apartment of Rustam's mother pierced Akbar's heart and, as was his wont in adversity, he shut himself up for days inside his private chamber lest his grief was interpreted by the ignorant as a sign of weakness or resentment against Divine dispensation.

\*Rustam was the son of Murad by the daughter of Khan-i-Azam Koka.

When the news reached Murad in Deccan, he sought to drown his sorrow in such virulent concoctions of alcohol and opium as left him a mental and physical wreck. Reports of the Prince's unending orgies of drinking distressed Akbar. He issued a *firman* ordering his return to Lahore. Murad was neck-deep in the slush of intoxicants, and refused to obey. Akbar sat up in surprise, wondering what was in store for him. This was the first rebuff to him from any of his sons. It looked to him as if a dark cloud was building up on the southern horizon. He sent for Daniyal who was then at Allahabad. The latter too showed little haste to comply with his father's instructions. Akbar wondered if a general revolt was in the offing. Perhaps to test the loyalty of his oldest son, he asked Salim to take command of the planned expedition to Turan. The prince demurred; he did not intend to leave Lahore at a time when the other two Princes seemed to be positioning themselves for a war of succession. The Emperor read the thoughts of his sons, and decided to put an end, once and for all, to this display of disobedience. Against the advice of some of his counsellors, he announced his plan to proceed himself to Deccan via Agra, and thus awaken his sons to their duties by a massive show of military strength. The royal drums sounded on the morning of 6 November 1598, and the Emperor left Lahore for Agra after a lapse of fourteen years.

The ladies of the harem, as also his mother Hamida Banu Begum, were left behind. This expedition was not a pleasure trip. Akbar knew by intuition that the going was to be rough and hazardous. It was easy to crush rebellions of over-ambitious Amirs and Rajas, but the threat of a revolt by his own sons was a different matter; the cold steel would have to blend with a cold heart to bring them to submission. There was no place for ladies in this men's affair. The ever loyal Shams-ud-Din Khan was designated Vakil, and left in Lahore to look after the routine affairs of the state. Prince Salim along with Raja Man Singh, was entrusted with guarding the frontiers in Rajasthan. The ancient and holy city of Ajmer thus became another citadel of Mughal strength.

Akbar felt that the Raja could be depended upon to keep a watchful eye on the *Wali Ahaad*. The latter too was an uninhibited drunkard, and had publically shown impatience more than once at what Badaouni called the Emperor's slow march to the grave. Akbar was not unaware of the threat held out by Salim,

but he chose to deal with him last. Love led the Emperor to believe that success of his arms in the south and affirmations of allegiance by Murad and Daniyal would bring Salim to the path of obedience.

It took the royal party two months and twenty-one days to reach Agra—a leisurely march when viewed in the light of the urgency that prompted it. Perhaps Akbar was hoping against hope that his sons would give up their truculence once they realized that he was resolved not to let paternal love soften the demands of sovereignty. Akbar's earlier plan was to bypass Agra and proceed direct to Burhanpur where Murad was camping. But once in his old capital, a change came over his perspective. Perhaps it would be better, he thought, to wait there for some time, take stock of the situation afresh, and then strike where the show of rebellion was the most menacing. This tactic paid off in that Daniyal saw the writing on the wall, and hurried to Agra to seek forgiveness for his act of disobedience. The Emperor received him with uncommon courtesy, loaded him with gifts, and thus created the impression that the throne itself was the reward for unquestioning loyalty. Hypnotized by the show of affection by his father, Daniyal swore by the sun, the stars and the moon to abstain from liquor and to observe implicitly the code of conduct prescribed for the royal princes.

Akbar was pleased, and hoped that similar gestures would soon come from Murad and Salim. He waited for two months, and then decided to send his top aide Abul Fazl to bring Murad to the path of sanity. This was a shrewd, calculated move to gauge the depth of Murad's disobedience and preparedness, and to assure the Khan-i-Khanan that the Emperor was ready to march southwards and break the obduracy of the Sultans. This was the first diplomatic assignment given to Abul Fazl. He moved with speed, leaving the heavy paraphernalia of a sizable, supporting force to follow in marches not exceeding ten to fifteen miles a day. When Abul Fazl was on the other side of the Narbada, a message came from the Khan-i-Khanan that Murad was stricken with epilepsy, and that the physicians were not optimistic about the chances of his survival. The news led Abul Fazl to quicken his pace. The resultant physical strain brought the ageing intellectual to the point of breakdown. The shock he received when near the bank of the river Purna made him call aloud for the help of the

Great Benefactor. Murad was dead.

There was panic everywhere. The growing discontent of the army found expression in a spate of desertions at all levels. There was a demand for return to Delhi; the hostile Deccan had little to offer either by way of pleasure or plunder. However, Abul Fazl used his persuasive tongue to good advantage, and succeeded in quelling the fears of the despairing officers. His assurance that the Emperor would soon be on his way to the Deccan was the surest guarantee of happy days ahead. He pleaded: "It is our duty to await the arrival of His Majesty. The Sultanates must not be left unconquered. This is our pledge to ourselves and to the Emperor."

Akbar received the news of Murad's death with unexpected calm. He did not pluck his hair in agony; neither did he shut himself up in seclusion to drown his sorrow. His reaction was that of a soldier, not of a doting parent. The last ten of Murad's twenty-nine years were tempestuous in that he packed them with virtually a century of sensuality. Akbar had tried in vain to argue him out of his addiction to intoxicants. In the end, he sent him to the Deccan, hoping that the battlefield might chasten him. This too did not work. Murad's death thus did not come as a surprise to the Emperor.

The void in the command in Deccan could not be left unfilled for long. Over the years, Akbar had evolved a system of dual control at the top; unitary authority was found to be unsuited to conditions in Hindustan. Differences of race and religion necessitated diversification; so did the ambitions and mutual enmities of the high-ranking courtiers. Daniyal of late had been the recipient of many royal favours. His submission seemed to indicate a real change of heart and Akbar, taking the Prince's affirmations of loyalty at their face value, appointed him to fill the vacancy caused by Murad's death. The mandate given him was to "bring the Sultanates of Deccan within the ambit of the Empire by negotiations if possible, and by conquest if necessary."

It is apparent that Akbar knew intuitively that the campaign to the south was to be his last military excursion; as such he did not relish even the thought of having to end his career on the note of a setback. The preparations he made for his design to annex the Sultanates were comprehensive. An army of two hundred thousand men, fitted out for long drawn war was put on the



alert for the southward march. Mirza Shahrukh was ordered to cross into the zone of war from Malwa. After consulting a celebrated team of court astrologers, Akbar decided to move out of Agra on 16 September 1599—ostensibly for a hunt in the jungles of Malwa but in actuality on the first leg of his long journey to the south. The three grandsons—Khusrau, Parvez and Khurram\*—accompanied the Emperor. Some ladies from the harem were invited to join the expedition. Akbar, at first reluctant to change his decision not to expose royal ladies to the hazards of a long trek, changed his mind when a Rajput astronomer told him the stars were under the influence of forces associated with feminine forbearance and tact. Tradition too regarded women as harbingers of victories in wars. Akbar agreed readily. He would take no chances even with the stars. What was commonly known as superstition was, to Akbar, a willingness to be guided by signals from behind the sets.

The 450-mile journey to the borders of Khandesh was completed in 195 days. The mighty army swept across the Narbada without meeting any real opposition on the way. The magnitude of the force struck terror in the hearts of those who contemplated resistance. Abul Fazl, along with brother Abul Barkat and his son Abdur Rahman, presented himself to the Emperor at Ujjain, and briefed him in regard to the latest developments in Ahmednagar and Khandesh, the two kingdoms whose subjugation was essential for a successful *putsch* further south.

Raja Ali, ruler of Khandesh and an ally of the Mughals, died fighting on the side of Khan-i-Khanan in the battle of Sipa\*\* on the bank of the river Godavari; his son Miran Bahadur abrogated the pact of friendship with the Emperor, and shut himself up in the fort of Asirgarh to save himself the embarrassment of having to cooperate with the invaders in hostilities against the fellow-Sultans. This was a menacing development. Asirgarh was known to be the strongest fort in the world—inaccessible and so well provisioned that it could last a siege for a hundred years. Diplo-

\*Khurram, who later ascended the throne as Shahjehan, was the son of prince Salim by Rani Balmati, daughter of a Rajput chieftain known as Mota Raja. He was born at Lahore in 1591.

\*\*Sultana Chand Bibi sought to recapture Berar in violation of the treaty signed with Prince Murad and Khan-i-Khanan. Her attempt was foiled by the Mughal army in the battle of Sipa on the bank of the river Godavari.

matic approaches to Bahadur yielded no result. He was a proud young man of strong convictions, and whatever the Mughal commanders did to dissuade him from his resolve was taken by him to be a ruse to deprive him of his sovereignty.

Developments in Ahmednagar were not less disconcerting. Chand Bibi was on the warpath. Though her manoeuvre to recapture Berar had been foiled, her unpredictability was a cause for constant anxiety. Overtures by Mirza Shahrukh and Abul Fazl himself had only strengthened her determination not to give in. The forces of Bijapur were at her beck and call. Besides, Abyssinian officers at her court were known for their devotion and loyalty; their expertise in the handling of big guns was an advantage that could not be countered easily by an invading army. All approaches to the city itself were beset with natural barriers of near-insurmountable proportions.

Akbar listened to Abul Fazl's narrative with attention, but gave no indication of the way his mind was working. The next day he called a meeting of the commanders and, without going over the background and reasons of his decision, had the following *firman* read to them:

We have not come all the way from Agra to listen to reasons for inaction. Ours is a mission of conquest, and it must be fulfilled quickly. Persuasion has failed to beget the desired results. We are, therefore, left with no alternative but to achieve our goal by the use of force. The army should immediately be divided into two striking units—one for the capture of Asirgarh and the other for breaking the resistance of Ahmednagar. When captured, these two strongholds will be used as stepping stones for the conquest of Bijapur and Golconda. We have no time to waste. The dual attack must be launched forthwith. Prince Daniyal and the Khan-i-Khanan are hereby deputed for the annexation of Ahmednagar. Sheikh Farid and Abul Fazl will invest Asirgarh, and leave no means unused to force Miran Bahadur to surrender. Mirza Shahrukh will be the liaison chief; he will coordinate the operations of the two units. For the present, I shall watch operations from a distance. Reports of victories and setbacks—howsoever minor and inconsequential—should be relayed to me by special messengers everyday. We have no reason to doubt the invincibility of our arms. Good luck.

The earnestness of the Emperor was not lost upon any commander. He meant every word of what he said. What he did not say was perhaps more meaningful. This was the last military campaign of his career. It was incumbent on every general and fighting man to strain his utmost for the realization of his ideal of a united empire.

It is surprising that Rajput generals were conspicuous for their absence in this campaign. Raja Man Singh was the only survivor of the old-time team of Rajput warriors at Akbar's court. He was at the time engaged in the delicate task of safeguarding the kingdom against the design of Prince Salim to stage a coup in Agra. The death of his son, Jagat Singh, and the murmurs of a fresh revolt in Bengal drove the Raja to harbour thoughts of retirement. However, his unswerving loyalty kept him firmly at his post. He stuck to his duties manfully. The purposes of his life, he was reported to have declared, were perhaps not yet fully realized.

The assault on Ahmednagar began in April 1600. The walled city itself was a citadel guarded by Abyssinian and Afghan troops. The fort, wherein Chand Bibi had shut herself up along with her ward Bahadur Nizamshah, was ringed around by a moat nearly thirty yards wide and twelve feet deep. Daniyal and the Khan-i-Khanan, heedless of the withering fire of guns placed on the city walls, brought to bear the full weight of their numbers to crush the defences. The fighting was hard and bitter. Daniyal, riding high on the wave of new-won popularity at the court, exposed himself many times to what looked like certain death in an effort to capture the city by assault. For two months the defenders held their own against a vastly superior force; then they began to wilt under the weight of destruction wrought by Mughal sappers and miners. The Sultana, fearing the worst, made known to a eunuch Hamid\* her intention to sue for peace and retire, along with Bahadur, to a fortress many miles away. The latter panicked and ran out to inform the Peshwa, Abhang Khan, of the fate that was in store for the people of Ahmednagar. The Abyssinian Wazir, already sick of the intrigues of the courtiers surrounding Chand Bibi, was enraged at the planned letdown, rushed into the fort, and stabbed the Sultana to death. Some historians hold that the regent took poison before the Abyssinian stormed into her chamber.

\*Abul Fazl says Habshi Khan, and Farishta names him Yetha.

The mode of her death apart, the grim reality was that no longer was there a Chand Bibi to inspire the defenders and lead them to hurl back waves after waves of the attackers. The news of the Sultana's death encouraged Daniyal to put more weight in his punches, and thus take full advantage of the crisis of leadership among the defenders. Abhang and his supporters held on for another two months before surrendering in August 1600. Fifteen hundred of the garrison were put to the sword; the rest were spared at the instance of an aged relative of Chand Bibi. The siege had lasted for four months and four days. Bahadur and all members of the ruling house were taken prisoner. A vast booty—including the valuable crown jewels, embossed arms and a splendid library—was taken by the Mughals. Bahadur was sent away to spend the remaining years of his life in the fort at Gwalior.

Akbar, who was at this time personally supervising the siege of Asirgarh, was jubilant at the success of Daniyal. The Prince received innumerable gifts from a grateful father, the most valuable being the right to use the red tent when on military duty. This privilege, not enjoyed by Salim so far, made many wonder if the Emperor was thinking of nominating Daniyal as his successor. The news of these favours in all probability caused concern in the camp of Salim. Akbar was not oblivious of repercussions of this nature, but there was perhaps a design in his dotings. The warning was clear: continued disobedience would cost Salim the throne of Hindustan. Akbar knew that he was powerful enough to crush an open rebellion by his son.

Keen to end the Deccan campaign as quickly as possible, Akbar urged Sheikh Farid Bokhari and Abul Fazl to increase their efforts to capture Asirgarh. The siege of this fort began on 12 March 1600, but so far little headway had been made to reach positions from where the gunners and sappers and miners could operate effectively against its defences. Akbar now resolved to go himself to the front line and decide on the spot the future line of strategy.

Perched on a hill 850 feet above the neighbouring country, the sixty-acre citadel was approachable only by two narrow, steep ascents, and those were well within the range of guns looking out from the lofty ramparts. Historian Faizi Sirhindi, who was a member of Abul Fazl's entourage, wrote that the ground adjacent to the hill was level and had neither trees nor jungle to serve as cover.

Farishta says that Asirgarh was founded as a relief work in 1370

by Asa Ahir, a charitable Hindu whose ancestors had retained the estates, of which the hill formed part, for nearly seven hundred years. The product of a crushing famine, the fort was stocked by the succeeding rulers of Khandesh with vast stores of essential commodities like oil and grain. The stores of arms and ammunition were inexhaustible. Huge reservoirs of water had been constructed as a safeguard against the frivolities of the goddess of rain. In it were not only narrow passages and barracks for the fighting men, but open spaces, gardens and fountains, in the midst of which were the houses of chiefs. In the thick walls were chambers for officers of the artillery from where, during all seasons, they could with comfort keep up fire of cannon and musketry. Faizi considered the fort a wonder of the world, and wrote that it was impossible to convey an idea of it to anyone who had not seen it.

Akbar inspected the fort from all sides. It was impossible to construct *sabats* (covered pathways) here as he had done at Chitor and Ranthambor. Steep approaches rendered this township of stone and steel a despair of the Mughal engineers. Akbar realized the futility of efforts to capture it by assault or long-range bombardment. Time was running out fast. Salim was known to be preparing for an open revolt. A long siege was, therefore, out of the question. Events in the north made it imperative that the Emperor return to Agra without delay. For two days Akbar secluded himself in his tent; at the end of this period of stocktaking, he sent by the hand of an envoy a letter to Miran Bahadur. A mixture of the hard and the soft, this communication advised the young ruler to "surrender and assure your sovereignty." Akbar also told him that it was only in alliance with the Mughals that he could hope to avenge the death of his father, Sultan Ali, at the hands of Bijapuris. Bahadur pondered over the tone and text of the offer, and at one time came very near to accepting it. Some officers, however, dissuaded him from falling in the trap. Asir, they pointed out, was Akbar's despair. "This communication is only a means to achieve by diplomacy what he cannot hope to conquer by force," said the bearded Sheikh Ansari who had spent his entire life in the service of the ruling house. Bahadur changed his mind. Personal submission, he decided, could not be contemplated. The farthest he could go was to acknowledge in principle the suzerainty of Akbar and that too if the siege was lifted immediately and the Mughal army left his kingdom within a specified period. Akbar was disappointed. However, he did not

despair of achieving success through negotiations. Another envoy was sent with a letter more soft than hard. Bahadur was taken in by the tone of reconciliation. He sent a team of officials, headed by his mother, to do homage to the Emperor. Costly gifts, including sixty-five elephants, were also sent as a token of his desire to make peace. Even this gesture did not satisfy Akbar. Nothing short of Bahadur's personal appearance would mollify him. The cup of his patience now spilt over. An order for resumption of bombardment was issued. For eight days and nights, the Mughal guns poured stone and steel on approaches to the fort. The blockade was so complete as not to allow even an ant to creep through to the citadel. Then there came a lucky break. A defector from the garrison gave information about a secret path leading to the foot of the fort. A team of daredevil miners did the rest. A forty-foot stretch of the outer wall was shattered, but Bahadur's engineers repaired the damage quickly. The Mughals were unable to force a breakthrough.

The incident, however, was a notice to the defenders that Asirgarh was not unconquerable. Bahadur's loss of confidence prompted Akbar's next move. He sent yet another communication to the beleaguered Sultan, inviting him to his camp for negotiations. The Emperor, according to the Jesuit Missionary Jerome Xavier, who was in attendance, assured the Sultan on oath that he (Bahadur) would be allowed to return in safety after the talks. Against the advice of his loyal Abyssinian commander, Bahadur threw away caution, and came out with a few attendants to meet the Emperor. The rest of the story is best told in the words of Du Jarric who wrote his narrative on the basis of observations recorded by Jerome Xavier:

The King, advancing humbly, did reverence. Suddenly, one of the Mughal officers caught him by the head and threw him down on the ground in order to force him to perform the *sajda*. Akbar contented himself with making a prefatory protest against the use of such violence. He then addressed the King in polite language, and desired him to send orders in writing to the fort, commanding the defenders to surrender. When Bahadur Shah refused to comply with the demand and solicited permission to return, he was detained by force in violation of Akbar's solemn oath.

The Abyssinian commander, on hearing the news, sent his son

Mubarak Khan to make a remonstrance against the shameless breach of faith. Akbar questioned the envoy concerning the willingness of his father to surrender. The young man replied that his father was not the man to surrender or to think even of parley, and added that if King Miran Bahadur should not return, successors\* were ready to take his place, and that whatever might happen the fortress would not be surrendered. Stung by that spirited reply, Akbar instantly ordered the youth to be stabbed to death. The Abyssinian commander thereupon sent a message to Akbar expressing the prayer that he might never behold the face of a king so faithless. Then, taking a scarf in his hand, he addressed the other officers in these terms: 'Comrades! winter is now approaching, which will oblige the Mughals to raise the siege and return home for fear of wholesale destruction. No mortal man will ever storm this fortress into surrender; it may be taken by God, or if the defenders should betray it. Truly, better and by far more honourable is the fate of those who observe the laws of fair dealing; wherefore, let you defend the place with spirit'.

Having thus spoken, he put the scarf round his neck, tightened the knot, and strangled himself.

This stirring act of self-immolation inspired the garrison to put up heroic resistance against the renewed Mughal attacks. The fort was truly invincible unless, as the Abyssinian commander put it, the defenders betrayed it. Despairing of the efficacy of his arms, Akbar brought to bear his money-power to force a breakthrough. Vast sums of money and valuable gifts of gold and silver were given in bribes to the defending Portuguese officers to win them to his side. The stratagem paid off. The gates of the fort were flung open by disloyal commanders on 17 January 1601—eleven and a half months after the siege had begun. Akbar entered in triumph, but his heart must have been sad at the thought of the manner in which he scored this victory. To placate his uneasy conscience, he announced a general amnesty, and ordered suitable subsistence

\*Royal Princes in the line of succession were required to live in the fort both in times of peace and war. There were seven such princes residing at the time in Asirgarh. Bahadur himself had spent most of his life in the fort.

allowances to be given to members of the royal family. The captive King was given four thousand gold pieces a year. The seven princes received half that amount. Whereas Miran Bahadur was incarcerated in the fort at Gwalior, the others were lodged in different strongholds in Malwa and Gujarat.

Historians are divided on the rights and wrongs of the means chosen by Akbar to gain possession of Asirgarh. Vincent Smith toes the line of Jesuit missionaries who accompanied Akbar to Deccan, and calls the great Mughal a barbarian, a man bereft of honour and considerations of chivalry. According to him, the treatment he meted out to Miran Bahadur violated the tradition of uprightness which lent an aura of Divine dignity to the kings and queens of Hindustan. Wolsley Haig and some others blame the young Sultan for the misery he brought upon himself. According to them, the terms offered by Akbar were liberal, and their rejection was an invitation to the Emperor to use whatever means he could to gain his objective. Time precluded a long drawn-out siege. Salim was poised dangerously in the north. Akbar did a short-cut to victory in Khandesh, and thus averted a crisis which might have lost him the empire. Akbar waged wars to win, never to lose them. The means to him were inconsequential. At Ranthambor he was faced with a situation similar to that he was confronted with in Khandesh. Where guns failed, Akbar did not hesitate to use other tactics to draw the enemy out. If camouflage and feigned retreat are permissible in a battle as a means to entrap the enemy forces, there seems to be little wrong with staging a feint of words to achieve the same goal. Also, it needs to be remembered that Akbar considered himself a human conduit through whom God expressed His will. Subjugation of Asirgarh was to him a Divine order; so were the means used to fulfil His command.

This said, it is admitted that Akbar would have emerged greater than the great he was had he brought to bear the conventional and less devious means to batter Asirgarh into surrender. He tried to secure the needed ramming equipment from the Portuguese in Goa, but the latter turned down the request. They had been informed secretly beforehand by Jerome Xavier that one of the objectives of Akbar's thrust in the south was to find a foothold for hurling the Christians back into the sea. Perhaps this fear was not unfounded. The missionaries yearned for Akbar's conversion to Christianity



and the Emperor, a genius in reading people's thoughts, kept them guessing till the end. It may not be a fortuitous guess that his show of consideration, amounting almost to respect, for them was a convenient cover to use them in his designs of bringing the whole of Hindustan under his rule. It is not surprising that the secret despatches of Jerome Xavier on which Vincent Smith and others of his ilk place complete reliance were written with a pen dipped in venom. Akbar's lapses and what Badaouni calls "his deviations from the truth" were the fallout of an all-consuming ideal-unity of Hindustan under his rule—that conditioned his life. Anyone who, in his reckoning, stood between him and the fulfilment of his dream was to be liquidated by means fair if possible or foul if necessary. Akbar's blemishes reveal his character more tellingly than do his virtues. He was not a barbarian; far from it. Rather, he was a highly civilized individual, ready always to forgive and forget and to make a new start in the quest of what he was searching all his life.

In recognition of the part played by Daniyal in its conquest, Khandesh was rechristened Dandesh and given to the prince as jagir. The conquered territories in the south were turned into three new *subas*—Ahmednagar, Berar and Khandesh—and their governance entrusted to Daniyal. Gujarat and Malwa were also added to his charge, and Akbar did Daniyal the honour of naming him Viceroy of Deccan. Abul Fazl was appointed his principal Adviser.

It was Akbar's regret that Bijapur, Golconda and Bidar had to be left unconquered. The news of Salim having proclaimed himself Shahinshah at Allahabad necessitated immediate departure from the south. The 500-miles' return journey to Agra was completed in fifty-three marches spread over sixty days. His arrival in the capital on 20 June 1601, was a sombre affair; the shadow of Salim's revolt hung over the city like a dark cloud threatening to burst any minute.

Abul Fazl's narrative of the reign of Akbar comes here to an end. The thread was taken up and the story completed by Muhib Ali\* in the reign of Jahangir. The break was unfortunate, but it does not detract much from the value of *Akbarnama* as a

\*Some historians hold that the person who completed *Akbarnama* after the death of Abul Fazl was Inayatullah Khan.

master-piece of descriptive writing. Muhib Ali's proficiency in the Persian language might not be as impressive as that of Abul Fazl, but his flare for history and the advantage of a hindsight more than make up for the shortfall in linguistic niceties, and renders the account of the remaining four years of Akbar's life a dramatic chronicle of hope, fear and in the end despair.

## Salim Rocks the Boat

At thirty-two, Salim thought he was nearer to the grave than the throne. Akbar's strong body showed no sign of ageing—a circumstance that led the impatient, fun-loving Prince to think of ways to wear the crown before the natural death of his father. As early as 1591, he was suspected of having hired the services of a court physician to poison Akbar. Timely diagnosis by a Hindu herbalist Bhim Nath saved the Emperor from what was given out to be an attack of colic. Thereafter, security inside the palace was tightened, and the official tasters were warned against laxity or neglect on pain of instant death. Though no names were mentioned, the corps of medical men at the court were asked not to let their noble profession be misused in any way.

Salim was in residence at Ajmer when the Emperor left for Deccan in 1599. Addiction to opium and alcohol had by now become his second nature; it often resulted in fits of extreme violence, and also at times led him to shut himself up in a secluded corner and harbour thoughts of renunciation. Raja Man Singh, though officially holding the post of Governor of Bengal and Bihar, lived in Ajmer for reasons of health. His adoptive sister, daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das, was Salim's first wife. Their son Khusrau, who was now thirteen, looked upon the Raja as his de facto guardian, and spent most of his time in the company of the Rajput chief. The close personal equation that developed between the two irked not only Salim, but also many younger ladies of his fast-

growing harem.\* A thick mist of womanly jealousies enveloped his seraglio, which culminated later in Khusrau's mother committing suicide by swallowing a large doze of opium.

The Raja, who watched at close quarters Salim's debaucheries and explosions of temper, became disenchanted, and he came to harbour plans for the ouster of Salim from succession. Their mutual distrust and near-hatred of each other took a new, sordid turn when the Raja invited Salim to join him in quelling a rebellion in Bengal spawned by Usman Khan. The Prince refused, suspecting the move to be a trap to entice him away to the perils of hostilities in a distant land. Man Singh went alone, and in one of the most impressive displays of his military genius brought the rebels to their knees in less than six months—a performance that won him the appreciation of the Emperor and the unprecedented honour of bestowal on him of the rank of the command of seven thousand. Excepting a few members of the royal family, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan was the only other recipient of this high distinction.

Man Singh did not return to Agra till 1603; his absence was an opportunity that Salim was waiting for. His plan to seize the capital while the Emperor was still in the south looked feasible, and early in 1601 he moved with speed and surreptition to deal a pre-emptive blow against his father. Though the number of Salim's followers was large and his treasure-chest bursting at the seams with illicit appropriations from the nobility in Rajasthan, his courage collapsed at the crucial hour. A firm refusal by the Governor Qulji Khan to open the gates of the city unnerved him. Not daring to launch an open attack, he bypassed the city, crossed the Jamuna eight miles to the east, and went straight to Allahabad. Salim was deeply disappointed at having missed the millions of gold coins known to be hoarded in the vaults of the fort at Agra. He confided his anguish to his top aide Khwaja Jahan, and consoled himself by visualizing the wealth that would fall to him in the eastern states.

A group of dissidents welcomed him in Allahabad. Assuming to himself the style and status of an independent sovereign, Salim went about consolidating his armed strength in anticipation of a

\*Between 1590 and 1600 Salim married or took mistresses at the rate of at least two a year.

confrontation with the Emperor. Gold and copper coins were struck in his name, and samples of the new currency were sent to Agra to underscore his freedom of action. Tradition has it that a Hindu hermit clad in saffron clothes, approached Salim to dissuade him from "the sin of making an enemy of your parent," and when told by an outraged prince to "tell God that the greater sin is for a father-king to live so long as to make his sons despair of ever wearing the crown," he raised his voice to sing the famous hymn prohibiting man to arrogate to himself the role of a faithless critic:

Man is truly great, but greater is He who created him. To decry the Lord is to decry one's own self. To revolt against Him is to cast dust at your own being. God is to the world what father is to the son. They both need to be looked upon with respect and reverence. Disobey not this rule. Else the universe will come to a grinding halt, and the moon, the suns and the stars will fall off and plunge the cosmos into eternal darkness.

The courtiers feared that some gruesome punishment was in store for the fakir. But the unpredictable Salim surprised everybody by inviting the hermit to sit on his right and implored him to expound on the theme of the song. For eleven days, Bairagi Ram Das explained to the Prince the spiritual nuances of the father-son relationship, and thus succeeded in softening his hostility to Akbar. For a whole year, Salim was content to play the harmless truant and wait for an opportunity to seek forgiveness for his acts of disobedience.

When Akbar returned to Agra in June 1601, the capital was virtually in a state of self-distrust. Rumours regarding the impending conflict filled the air. Nobody seemed to know exactly the reason of Salim's estrangement. Some believed it was power-lust; others considered the split to be religious in character; still others sought an explanation in Salim's involvement with Anarkali, a maid in his mother's household.

Akbar knew that the bulk of the army was loyal to him; he also knew that Salim lacked both courage and capability to withstand an attack on his positions. But tender love for his Sheikhu Baba confused him. To take up arms against one whom he regarded as a gift of God in answer to his long and soulful prayers called

for callousness. Pleas for restraint by Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai and Mariam Makani Hamida Banu Begum added to the turmoil in Akbar's heart. Then there was the matchless Salima Sultan Begum, mother of the no-longer-alive Murad, who constantly used her poetic licence to remind the Emperor of his prayers, pledges and promises and to beseech him to be patient and forgiving. She had won Akbar's heart when he was hardly eighteen. Now at sixty, his devotion to her was no less full. It was Salima who comforted Akbar one evening when he was in agony hearing about Salim's advance towards Agra at the head of thirty thousand cavalry. She, a poet, recited to him: ". . . God's purposes are hidden from the ken of man; Makhfi\* makes no secret of her conviction that in the end the right will prevail; love is more powerful than a million drunken elephants."

Akbar regained his composure, and sent a letter to Salim, ordering him in no uncertain terms to "learn to obey so that you may know how to rule." The warning was clear; his advance would be checked with full force of the imperial army. "It is not my intention to humiliate you, but I will consider it my finest hour if I have to take up arms against my own son for the defence of values sacrosanct to the house of Babar." The rebuke worked. The Prince returned to Allahabad from Etawah.

Akbar thought he had gained his point and, in a gesture of reconciliation, offered Salim the governorship of Bengal and Bihar. This move was misunderstood by Salim to be a manoeuvre to dislodge him from his stronghold and to virtually banish him to a distant, unattractive part of the kingdom. Salim expressed his unwillingness to accept the offer, and sent Khwaja Jahan to explain to the Emperor the reasons for his decision. This was the proverbial last straw that broke Akbar's patience, and impelled him to intervene militarily to call a halt to his son's pretence of independence. A letter was sent to Abul Fazl that he should immediately return to the court. Akbar needed him by his side at this hour of crisis.

Without making adequate security arrangements Abul Fazl left Birhanpur in the last week of July 1602, not knowing what Fate had in store for him. The events that followed are best told in the words of Asad Beg, a man of learning who belonged to Abul Fazl's following:

\*Makhfi was the pen-name of Salima Begum.

It was decreed by the will of Providence that the most learned should travel without proper escort. When the Emperor's friend and confidant reached the city of Sironj, the ruler of that region, Raja Gopal Das, represented that the armed contingents escorting the learned scholar were exhausted and that it needed to be replaced by a fresh force he had raised. The ill-fated learned man virtually committed suicide by giving his approval for the replacement suggested. The fresh troops were inexperienced. They had not taken part in any military engagement so far. On the other hand, the troops that were left behind were seasoned warriors, capable of defending themselves against a force many times more superior in number. When the party was a few miles out of Sironj, Raja Bir Singh Deo, younger brother of the notorious Raja Ram Chand, attacked it from three sides. Many gallant Afghans were slain in cold blood in the fighting. The band of poltroons provided by the wily Gopal Das crossed over to join Bir Singh. When the Sheikh realized that the raiders were no mere robbers, he rallied around him a few men of his personal bodyguard and made ready to give a fight. The task was hopeless. Everyone of Bir Singh's hirelings was clad in armour. Their swords and spears flashed in the air like lightning. A loyal Afghan tried to lead the Allama away from the scene of action, but in vain. It was impossible to cut through the wall of steel that surrounded the imperialists. At last, the inevitable came to horse at full gallop, struck the pass. A Rajput, coming on his learned one with a spear with such force that the weapon came out from the other side of his body. The Sheikh fell, bleeding profusely. His horse rolled over him, and it was surprising that he did not succumb under the weight of the animal. There was life in him when Bir Singh appeared on the scene, dismounted, and walked briskly towards the dying man of letters. He sat down by the side of the famed philosopher, took out a piece of cloth from his pocket, and wiped off with it the blood that was pouring out from the mortal wound. The God's chosen one, though pale and weak, mustered whatever strength was left in him, and abused the Rajput chief for his treachery. While his supporters were engaged in the gruesome game of killing the outnumbered defenders, Bir Singh himself flashed his sword to sever the Allama's head from the neck. It was a foul deed. God willed it that way. Many friends had warned the Allama of the

dangers that lay on the route, but he did not listen to any of them. A fakir had forewarned him about the evil intentions of Bir Singh Deo, leader of the Bundhelas, who revelled in loot and plunder. It is useless to lament. When Fate droops its wings from heaven, the most able men have become deaf and dumb. The general massacre stopped after the Sheikh's head and trunk were carried away. The Rajputs, thereafter, scampered away in different directions. It seemed their assigned task had been completed. Loyalty and learning went out mourning when life departed from the body of Abul Fazl.

Asad Beg does not mention that Bir Singh's perfidy was inspired and paid for by Salim. The latter looked upon Abul Fazl as his biggest foe, and he feared that on reaching Agra the Sheikh would lend moral support to his father's plan of dislodging him from Allahabad. In his autobiography, Salim confesses having hired Bir Singh for the murder. On ascending the throne, Salim more than compensated the Bundhela chief for the service he rendered him.

Salim regarded the Sheikh as a sly opportunist, disloyal both to God and the Emperor. Many years earlier in Lahore he discovered that a team of calligraphists was engaged by Abul Fazl to make copies of the commentary of the Quran written by his father, Sheikh Mubarak. The Prince was convinced that Abul Fazl was at heart an orthodox Sunni Muslim, and that his alignment with the reformist movement launched by Akbar was only a means to gain favour at the court. In Salim's estimation Abul Fazl was an evil genius who led the Emperor to the path of apostasy, and thus sowed seeds of disruption and revolt in the kingdom.

This distrust was, perhaps, a corollary of Salim's growing hostility to his father. Loyalty to Akbar, in his reckoning, was a sin unpardonable, an impiety that called for stern action. Raja Man Singh also evoked Salim's antipathy. All those who seemed to prop up his seemingly indestructible father on the throne were apparently traitors to the rebellion which Salim had spawned. In Abul Fazl's death, Salim saw the removal of the biggest hurdle in his way. Sordid ambition could not have manifested itself in a more crude manner. Salim's fixities were perhaps made more fixed by his drunkenness.

No one had the courage to break the news of Abul Fazl's death to the Emperor. According to an old custom observed by Timurids,



the death of a Prince or a close friend was not announced to the reigning emperor in plain words; rather, a representative of the deceased presented himself before the throne with a blue scarf around his neck. In accordance with this tradition, the Sheikh's *Vakil* came to the hall of audience with a blue scarf. Following the customary prostration, he stood there, before the throne, like a convict awaiting the pronouncement of a sentence. It took Akbar a few moments to realize the import of the blue scarf and, when he did, tears welled in his eyes. A bedlam of wailing broke out in the hall. The Emperor was overwhelmed with grief. His only comment was: "If Salim wished to be Emperor he might have killed me and spared Abul Fazl."

The manner of Abul Fazl's death shocked Akbar. He cried aloud for vengeance, and ordered that every nook and corner of Bundelkhand should be scoured to capture Bir Singh. "Bring him to me alive so that I can have the satisfaction of severing his head with my own sword; in case he dies before he is captured, bring his corpse so that I can have it filled with straw and hung upside down at a thoroughfare for vultures to feast upon." For a whole year, the Mughal army contingents used every known device to track down Bir Singh, but without success. The failure incensed Akbar who appointed a commission headed by Asad Beg, to inquire into the conduct of officers associated with the search. The findings were of a general nature; responsibility of the failure could not be fixed on any one person. In the end, the healing touch of time soothed Akbar. Reconciliation with Salim also perhaps helped palliate his anguish.

The death of Abul Fazl was a severe blow to Akbar. Professor Blochman is right when he says:

Not only for Akbar but for the empire was this man's death a loss. His influence on his age was immense. It may be that he and Faizi led Akbar's mind away from orthodox Islam—this charge is brought against him by every Muslim writer—but Abul Fazl also led his sovereign to a true appreciation of his duties, and from the moment that he entered court the problem of successfully ruling over mixed races, which Islam in but few other countries had to solve, was carefully considered, and the policy of toleration was the result.

Akbar in his life time came very near to achieving the ideal of being regarded father of his people. This was a tremendous achievement, and to no small extent does the credit for this go to Abul Fazl. His intellect was sharp and his vision clear and wide angled. He saw the present and also the future with the hind lights of history. The past, according to him, held out a clear warning against policies of religious intolerance and persecution. The modern concept of a secular state may be said to have originated in the mind of Akbar; Abul Fazl gave it a practical shape by moulding it to suit conditions prevalent in the sixteenth century Hindustan. No doubt many mistakes of implementation were made, but that in no way detracts from the bigness of the idea and the magnitude of the exercise to translate it into reality. A gaping void was left in Akbar's life by the passing away of Abul Fazl. Faizi had died in 1597, two years after the demise of Sheikh Mubarak at the age of over a hundred. These three were the philosophers who conceived and gave content to the reformist movement. *Din-i-Illahi* now gasped desperately for breath. Akbar wondered if he alone would be able to keep it afloat for long. A distressing thought deep down in his heart was that his rebel eldest son had ranged himself on the side of reaction.

Pinning his faith on what he called the basic goodness of the human heart, Akbar ventured another attempt to bring around his son to the path of obedience. The suave Salima Begum was chosen to carry a message from him to Salim, and to persuade him to shed rebellion and accompany her to Agra for reconciliation with his father. Despite the handicaps of age and indifferent health, the good-natured Salima undertook the mission, and brought off a pleasant surprise in that Salim relented and agreed to submit. Agra was jubilant at the success of Salima, and the Emperor set apart a whole treasure for bestowal as gift on the dexterous diplomat. An excited grandmother, Hamida Banu Begum, travelled two stages to welcome Salim and to escort him to her palace. The long-awaited father-son meeting was cordial. It seemed the by-gones had, once and for all, been relegated to the region of the by-gones, and that the come-together meant genuine surrender by one side and unreserved pardon by the other. No questions were asked and no explanations given at the meeting. A swell of tears, on either side, sealed the concord. Salim presented to his father two thousand gold mohars and nearly eight hundred elephants.

The Emperor returned the compliment by placing his turban on the head of his son—a silent declaration that Salim would ascend the throne after his death. When parting, Salim requested the Emperor for the gift of a famed elephant from the royal stable. Akbar agreed readily, saying: "All is yours, my son. Nothing is more valuable to me than your loyalty and affection. At sixty plus treasures, horses and elephants lose much of their attraction. The world beyond is paved with what one gives. Possessions here are a liability there."

All went well till in May 1603, Akbar suggested that Salim undertake a military expedition for chastisement of Rana Amar Singh\* who was making daring encroachments on Mughal territories in Rajasthan. Suspicion of his father's motives once again reared its ugly head, and Salim on one pretext or another expressed his reluctance to accept the assignment. The rebuff provoked Akbar to issue a formal *firman* appointing Shahzada Salim to the command of the proposed expedition. The rift thus once again came out in the open. The ladies of the harem, in particular Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai and Salima Sultan Begum, requested the Emperor not to press the matter, and let Salim continue to live under his eye at the court.

An ageing Akbar succumbed to their pleas, withdrew the *firman*, and shelved for the time being the plan to resume hostilities against Chitor. This was an unfortunate decision. Here was an admission by Akbar that he was effete and powerless, and that with the help of his "mothers" Salim could defy his orders with impunity. Some of his advisers, in particular Raja Man Singh,\*\* made bold to express themselves against the cancellation of the order. They feared the Shahzada was likely to take the royal gesture as a sign of weakness and start afresh on finding ways to realize his ugly ambitions. Akbar tended to share their apprehensions, and decided to grant Salim's request (made shortly after he came to Agra early in 1603) for return to Allahabad. This decision again could not be explained by the logic of known realities. Allahabad was Salim's stronghold, and to send him there was to virtually invite him to stage another rebellion. There was perhaps more to the Emperor's decision than

\*Rana Amar Singh was the son of Rana Pratap. The latter died in 1597.

\*\*Raja Man Singh was recalled to the court after the death of Abul Fazl. He was the recipient of high honours for his success in quelling the rebellion in Bengal.

met the eye.

Belief is current in northern India that Salim's romance with Anarkali, a maidservant of the household of his mother, Mariam Zaman i Jodha Bai, was the real reason for Akbar to depute him on duties outside Agra. Whether he went to Rajasthan or Allahabad was of little consequence; it was important that the lovers should be separated. Akbar could not bring himself to grant Salim's request for marrying Anarkali. Considerations of status barred Anarkali's way to the harem of the heir-apparent.

It has not been possible to verify the commonly accepted story that Akbar, in a fit of rage, imposed a sentence of death on Anarkali. The legend has it that the undaunted girl was framed alive between two walls of bricks. According to a folksong "when the last brick of the horizontal tomb was about to be laid, Anarkali called aloud the name of her royal lover, and then, gasping for breath, went to eternal sleep." If true, the punishment meted out to Anarkali is a scathing comment on Akbar's norms of justice and also on his views about the place of royalty in human society. It is a thousand pities that the chroniclers of his reign chose to remain silent on a romance which perhaps made rounds in court circles either in the form of gossip or rumour. The tomb of Anarkali in Lahore bears testimony to the existence of a fair person of that name who lost her life in mysterious circumstances. It is customary for young lovers to exchange at the tomb vows of eternal faithfulness—a traditional act that suggests that the legend was not merely a figment of some bard's imagination.

That Shah Begum, daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das and mother of Prince Khusrau, committed suicide about this time by swallowing an overdose of opium lends some credence to the story. The turmoil in Salim's seraglio was perhaps the result of his infatuation with a girl much below his status. Historians tend to connect the suicide with Khusrau's candidature for the throne after Akbar's death. The time and circumstances seem to be against this surmise.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that in allowing Salim to return to Allahabad, Akbar chose what he considered to be the lesser evil. Once there, the prince relapsed into his incurable vice of inebriety, and let loose a reign of terror interspersed occasionally by show of incredible munificence.

Akbar was distressed at reports of his son's brutalities. When told

that an officer of the Department of *Nashriat* had been skinned alive in Salim's presence, the Emperor could contain himself no longer. "What should I do?" he asked his only remaining friend of youth, Raja Man Singh. The latter, a picture of reverence and loyalty, submitted:

Persuasion, your Majesty, is the method of the weak and the wavering. Pardon me, sire, if I venture to suggest the use of force. The stakes are high. The future of the Timurid dynasty hangs in the balance. Time is running out fast. Your Majesty owes it to the millions of your subjects that the empire continues to be strong and stable. Every available means need to be employed to safeguard the kingdom against disintegration. As always, my insignificant life is at the beck and call of your august Majesty.

Akbar understood. His mind was made up. Salim had to be saved from himself. Orders were issued for a force to be got ready immediately. The expedition was to be led by the Emperor himself. Here was a bold decision—perhaps the boldest of his life—by the 62-year-old, grief-stricken monarch to wage a war against his own son. Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai was torn by conflicting loyalties. So was the old and weak Mariam Makani Hamida Banu Begum. They pleaded with Akbar for restraint, but to no avail. The Emperor had geared himself to a pitch of resolve from where there was no going back. He moved out of Agra on 21 August 1604. This time there were no ladies in his entourage.

Akbar decided to proceed to Allahabad by water. The army preceded him a few days earlier by land. Hundreds of scouts were sent in advance to spread news about the size and strength of the imperial force. Akbar seemed to be hoping all the time that Salim would panic and submit, and that the use of arms would not be necessary. His hope came true, but not in the manner he envisioned. Fate planned differently. Hardly had the royal flotilla moved a few miles out of Agra when a violent storm broke out, and the boat carrying Akbar was grounded. Efforts to refloat the mini-man-of-war failed. High winds and rain beat back the teams of hundreds of boatmen deployed to refloat the vessel. For two days and nights the tempest raged unabated. Then came the news that the 77-year old Hamida Banu Begum was taken seriously ill, and that she had

expressed a wish to see the Emperor. Akbar thought the illness was only a womanly manoeuvre to disrupt his plans, but when an urgent message came from the celebrated physician Salivahan that Mariam Makani was engaged in a hopeless fight against the angel of death, the Emperor hurried back to be by the bedside of his mother. Four days later, Hamida Banu passed away,\* achieving in death what she had failed to accomplish in life through pleas and persuasion. She perhaps died a happy person; the knowledge that the father-son conflict had been averted for the time being must have been a source of comfort to her. To Akbar also the death of his mother could not have been better timed; he was saved the anguish and embarrassment of having to raise his sword against one whom he loved very dearly.

Seeing in the nine-day drama the hand of God, Akbar recalled the army, and sent instead a tenderly worded message to inform his Sheikhu Baba of the death of his grandmother. It seems Salim too was waiting for an opportunity to step down without loss of face, and make peace with his father. He hurried to Agra with the declared wish to offer his condolences to the Emperor. That he brought with him an army containing fifty thousand cavalry and hundreds of war elephants is an enigma. Some historians tend to believe that his actual intention was to stage a coup, but he lost courage at the eleventh hour. Not deceived by his son's guise of a penitent, the Emperor sent him a message, couched once again in words of conciliation, that he should enter Agra accompanied by not more than a few hundred of his followers. Willy-nilly, Salim obeyed. He left his army some ten miles on the other side of Jamuna, and presented himself at the court in the disarming robes of a mourner. Akbar received him with courtesy, and accepted with pleasure the gifts—thousands of gold mohars and hundreds of elephants—the Shahzada offered. The formalities over, Akbar rose from the throne, took Salim by the arm, and told him plainly that he was a feeble-hearted fool to leave his eighty thousand armed supporters at a distance from where they could not readily come to his assistance. The Prince was under arrest. Some chroniclers aver that the Emperor gave a smack in his son's face, felled him,

\*The body of Hamida Banu Begum was taken to Delhi and buried in the tomb of her husband, Humayun Padshah. Akbar was one of the pallbearers on the first stage of the eleven-day journey from Agra.

and ordered that he should be kept in solitary confinement in one of the *ghusalkhanas*\* of the fort. Alcoholic drinks and opium were not permitted to be served to him. Salim was in agony. On the second day, he raved like a madman and begged for a cup of his favourite wine. The Emperor relented, and deputed one of his personal physicians to examine the Prince and prescribe such quantities of alcohol as he considered necessary for his health. The taming of the temperamental Salim bristled with complications, especially when Mariam Zamani and Sultan Salima Begum took into their scheming heads to leave no design unused to win freedom for their Baba. The pressure from the senior ladies became too compelling to be resisted for long. Akbar gave in and allowed Salim to shift to his own palace. The rebellion, to all outward appearances, thus came to an end. What became of Salim's vast army is not known. Perhaps the men were disarmed and asked to repair to their homes quietly. The elephants and horses found berths in the royal stables. It looked as if Salim had bowed to the inevitable and resigned himself to an indefinite wait for the throne.

In the beginning of 1605, a Brahmin astrologer Parmanand told Akbar that the planets were moving to a position which presaged a crisis, and that when in the reign of Emperor Harsha a similar positioning of the planets was noticeable a grand *yagya* was performed to avert danger. Akbar was too preoccupied at the moment with quelling Salim's rebellion to think seriously of performing the complicated ritual of a *yagya*, but the forecast continued to disturb his peace of mind. When Salim settled down to the normal life of a royal prince at court, Akbar tended to believe that the crisis had passed and that there was no reason for him any more to spend sleepless nights over the Brahmin's words.

Then came the news of Daniyal's illness in the south. Excessive drinking had led the 33-year old Prince to the brink of complete physical ruin. According to Muhib Ali, Daniyal "put his foot upon his soul and washed his hands of life, and drank copiously against the advice of his well-wishers." Gradually, his brain was affected, and he suffered from acute pains in the stomach. For

\*The literal translation of *ghusalkhana* is a bathroom. In actuality, a Mughal *ghusalkhana* was a multi-room complex equipped with amenities necessary for royal relaxation and pleasure. In later years, some public rooms also came to be known as *ghusalkhana*.

forty days he lay in bed, opening his lips occasionally only to ask for a cup of wine. It became clear he could not live for long. The efforts of the physicians to save him failed. The end came on Saturday, 11 March 1605. His wife Jahan Begum, daughter of Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, was so grieved that she wanted to be buried alive with him. Her sorrow was great and, according to Muhib Ali, she spent the remaining years of her life as if in a trance.

The news of Daniyal's death was a hammer-blow that stunned Akbar. He sent for the Brahmin astrologer, and asked him if the crisis he forecast had passed with the death of his son. The holy man kept quiet. The Emperor was in tears, and asked him to do his readings again. In reply, the Brahmin recited a verse from the Upanishads which stressed the role of Karma and the inevitability of fate. Akbar did not press the matter further. He seemed to remember an observation made many years ago by the Jain teacher Hiravijaya that misfortunes seldom came single. He dismissed the astrologer with the gift of a hundred gold mohars. Age had mellowed him. In younger days he might have ordered the evil tongue of the Brahmin to be pulled out.

Daniyal's death reawakened Salim's sordid ambition. Their mutual fear of each other served as a brake on their acquisitive aspirations. Neither could read correctly the Emperor's mind in regard to succession. They both hoped to be chosen, but neither had reason to be optimistic. With Daniyal gone from the scene, Salim broke loose and began to behave as if Akbar was already dead and he was the occupant of the throne. Akbar overlooked the resurgence of arrogance in his son, hoping that leniency would perhaps beget salutary results. He felt once again that God was against his use of force. Parental love led him to forget his responsibilities to himself and the Empire.

Fate had been cruel to Akbar since his return from the south, but the latest bereavement was the cruelest blow of all. His sorrow was so great that it seemed to affect his mental poise. To lose two sons in their thirties in five years was more than he could bear with equanimity. Forlorn and wearing a look of distraction, he was often heard calling aloud for Sheikh Salim Chishti whose prayers and benediction, he believed, had secured for him the gift of three sons. The fear that Salim might also go the way Murad and Daniyal had left gripped him. Concern about the future of the



Timurid dynasty corroded his chest. Grandsons Khusrau, Parvez and Khurram held out a ray of hope, but they were too young, he felt, to be able to hold their own against the ambitious go-getters lurking in the wings. And he bemoaned that there was no Bairam around to save the empire from falling apart. The clean-shaven face of Brahmin Parmanand haunted him.

## Reconciliation on Death-Bed

The once star-studded court of Akbar now wore a deserted look. Gone were the brave and loyal *umra* ready always to lay down their lives for defence of values dear to the Emperor. Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Mirza Aziz Koka and Raja Man Singh were the only remnants of the old guard who lent lustre to Mughal arms and tradition of selfless service. This trio too was divided on a question that baffled Akbar—the suitability of Prince Salim for succession to the throne. The Mirza and the Raja were convinced that the Empire could be held together only if a liberal, broad-minded scion of the Timurid family came to power after Akbar. They were strongly opposed to Salim's candidature for reasons of his drunkenness, intolerance and high temper. His revolt and repeated defiance of Akbar's authority were, to them, sins unpardonable, and they secretly joined hands to work together on a plan to win the Emperor's approval for Salim's supercession.

The task was not easy, but they pinned their faith in the Padshah's perspicacity and soundness of judgment to gain their end. Their design was to move step by a careful step, and to create such an upsurge of revulsion against the highliving Prince as would leave the Emperor no alternative but to bypass his claim. Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai and Salima Sultan Begum were the biggest hurdles in their way, but they hoped to blunt their opposition by putting up a candidate who could not be unacceptable to them. Khusrau, eldest son of Salim, was their choice. The 18-year old Prince was a well-balanced, liberal intellectual who had endeared himself

to the Emperor and his spouses, for his learning and charm of manners. Restrained and sober, Khusrau's only wife was a daughter of Mirza Aziz Koka; on his mother's side, he was the adoptive son-in-law of Raja Man Singh. With Chughtai and Amber blood in his veins, Khusrau could be depended upon to maintain intact the policy of religious equality and toleration initiated by Akbar. Not so Salim. He had leaned heavily on the critics of *Din-i-Illahi* to gain support for his revolt, and had thus come to be regarded as an orthodox Muslim purist hostile to the reformist movement started by his father. This line of argument was likely to clinch the issue insofar as Akbar was concerned. The ladies, the plotters reckoned, would fall in line once it was known that the Emperor was ranged against Salim.

High-level lobbying for Khusrau and against Salim led Akbar to a stage of doubt and indecision where he was prepared to rely on omens, and thus leave the choice to what he repeatedly called the unseen hand of the All-Knowing, All-Powerful Creator of the Universe. Perhaps to ascertain His will, the Emperor arranged a fight between the two equally famed and equally mighty elephants, Giranbar owned by Salim and Abrup of the stables of Khusrau. Nearly the whole of Agra turned out to see what promised to be a close and fierce bout. Tents were pitched around the arena for royalspectators. Akbar and Prince Khurram sat in the red pavilion on the east. Salim and Khusrau took their seats, with their supporters, under *shamianas* pitched in the northern and southern corners. Before the fight started they paraded on their eye-catching horses all around the arena. The senior ladies in their colourful costumes gathered inside a tent on the west. The two animals conditioned for the occasion with meals of vitalizing herbs and honey, came out smartly from the north and south, and fell upon each other at a signal given from the back of a referee elephant near the Emperor's pavilion. A howl went up as Giranbar knocked out his adversary with a ferocious thrust of his massive head. Abrup was so severely mauled that the referee sent another elephant, Ranthaman, to his aid. Salim's supporters objected strongly to this interference and pelted Ranthaman with stones, wounding both the animal and the driver. Akbar was upset and sent a message to Salim that he should stop his followers from breaking the rules of the game. The Prince replied that the pelting did not have his sanction, but that he would do whatever he could to separate the elephants. There-

after, fireworks were let off to scare the animals into docility. The effect was, however, the opposite. Frightened, the three animals ran away and threw themselves into the Jamuna. The result was an anti-climax, the fight being over before the spectators had settled down to watch it. The Emperor clad, we are told by Muhib Ali, in very simple, cotton clothes, congratulated Salim on his victory and sympathized with Khusrau at the poor performance of Abrup. However, gifts of great value were given to both father and son. The driver of the winning elephant received one hundred gold mohars and a pension for life for himself and his family. Khurram, then a lad of fourteen, showed great interest in the fight, and told his grandfather that he too would like to own an elephant of the size and strength of Giranbar. The Emperor promptly granted the request. One of his own mountain-like elephants, Zinhar, was transferred to the stable of the future Shahjahan.

It is difficult to guess whether the omen pleased Akbar. He was on record to have told Mirza Aziz Koka that he would not like to deviate from the Timurid tradition of passing on the throne to the eldest son. Giranbar's decisive victory was perhaps taken by him as a Divine confirmation of his view. It is a strange coincidence that the next day—Monday, 21 September—Akbar was stricken with what was to be his last and fatal illness—stomach upset accompanied by acute abdominal pains. Hakim Ali was in attendance. He did not take the ailment seriously, and restricted the treatment to administering low-potency medicines to relieve discomfort. He hoped the Emperor's strong constitution would provide effective resistance against the disease, and that nature would do the curing. For nine days Ali remained intriguingly passive, doing virtually nothing to root out the cause of the ailment, which he later diagnosed as a form of chronic dysentery. Some historians tend to feel—and with good reason too—that behind this negative approach was the hand of Salim.

However, when the disease took a turn for the worse, there was panic all around. Ali consulted other court physicians, and prescribed a course of treatment for acute diarrhea. The Emperor became weaker, and soon it became clear that the chances of recovery were slight. Rumours swept across Agra, and the factions for and against Salim became ready for a conflict.

Man Singh and Aziz Koka were the first to move. Their plan was to arrest Salim, call a meeting of the *umra*, and secure their app-

royal for declaring Khusrau to be the next in succession. Zia-ul-Mulk, an ardent supporter of Salim, forewarned him of the plot that was hatching, and advised him to leave Agra as quickly as possible. The Prince panicked and boarded a boat under cover of darkness with the intention of fleeing to his favourite Allahabad. The events thereafter moved rapidly. Sheikh Rukun-ud-Din Rohilla, an ardent supporter of Salim, mounted a counter-offensive to defeat the Raja-Mirza design, and at the same time sent an urgent message to the Prince to return to Agra. Emboldened by the news of the support that was building up for him, Salim retraced his steps. The conference convened by his opponents turned a deaf ear to the pleas of Raja Man Singh, and broke up in complete disorder when Said Khan Chughtai, a rare vintage orator, exhorted the *umra* to respect and live by Timurid tradition and law, and not to endorse any resolution which might savour of heresy and a break with the past. He also questioned the motives of Raja Man Singh and Mirza Aziz Koka, and said that it would be an evil day when considerations arising from personal relationships were given precedence over the sanctions of religion and history. The Raja failed to secure the support he hoped for; he knew the game was up, and left in a hurry for Bengal; he took Khusrau with him. The Mirza lingered on in the belief that Salim, in his saner moments, would tend to forgive and forget; his hope was not belied.

His worst fears over, Salim went to the fort to do homage to his dying father. He entered the bedchamber from the eastern door, and went straight up to the heavily cushioned diwan on which lay the Emperor gasping for breath. Hakim Ali, accompanied by other physicians, stood pensively in a corner studying intently the changing contours of the Padshah's face. A little distance away to the right stood Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan, Mirza Aziz Koka, Mir Zia-ul-Mulk, Mir Mustaza Khan and a few others. Salim bowed deferentially and stood at the foot of the diwan waiting for the monarch to open his eyes and acknowledge his submission. A few tense moments passed before Akbar looked at his son from behind the half-open lids of his tired eyes. Salim prostrated himself in the customary way, and then rose with utmost reverence to await what the Emperor had to say to him. Akbar's lips were seen to move, but nobody could hear what he said. Then he gestured to Mirza Aziz Koka to place the royal turban on Salim's head and also to gird him with the sword of Timur which hung on the wall behind.

Akbar again 'tried' to speak, but in vain. He knew he was dying. Salim (later Jahangir) observes in his Memoirs that tears swelled in his father's eyes and that he made a great effort to hold them back from rolling over on to his cheeks. At this stage Hakim Ali intervened, and respectfully requested the Prince to step back and let the patient rest. The Emperor then closed his eyes.

Outside the fort, the people had gathered in thousands. Word had gone round that the Emperor's hours were numbered, and that he had chosen Sultan Salim to be his successor. Quiet pervaded the palaces of the Begums and senior ladies of the family. The houses of the *umra* and other dignitaries also wore an unusually grim appearance. People stood in clusters all around the fort, whispering, fearing, hoping and praying. As the darkness thickened, their apprehensions became worse. A little past midnight, the sound of wailings rose from within the fort. The Emperor was dead. Thursday, 17 October 1605 became a dark day in the history of the Mughals.

As was customary, the next day a breach was made in the outer wall of the fort, through which the pall-bearers, led by Sultan Salim, Sultan Parvez and Sultan Khurram, carried the *jenazah* to the tomb designed and partly completed in his life-time by Akbar himself. The Emperor was laid to rest in conformity with his wishes. He was the first Mughal monarch to have been born and buried on the soil of Hindustan.

Did Akbar die a natural death? Nobody knows. As has been mentioned already, some historians are of opinion that Salim conspired with Hakim Ali to get him poisoned; others suspect Raja Man Singh of treachery; still others tend to believe a story that Akbar swallowed by mistake a lethal doze of poison meant for Ghazi Beg of Sind. There is no way to check these versions. The circumstances, however, lend some credence to the alleged complicity of Salim in one way or another. Hakim Ali rose to high favour soon after Salim's accession, and the latter made no attempt to hide that he was under obligation to the physician for some unspecified services; in Tuzk-i-Jahangiri, he goes out of his way to absolve Ali of accusations of negligence in treatment of the Emperor. His observation that if "Alis would make no mistake, Akbars would never die" is the type of a clue that students of individual behaviour lay much store by. Furthermore, Salim was by temperament an unpredictable rough-neck; no means was ever too

low for him to gain his end. And, it needs to be remembered that the most compulsive end that conditioned his life was the acquisition of the throne before he was too old to enjoy its privileges.

Elimination of Abul Fazl reflected the morbid intensity of Salim's ambitions. Akbar seemed to him to be everlasting, almost indestructible. To remove him from his path was an obsession that found expression in many ways. As early as 1591, he was suspected of master-minding a plot to poison the Padshah. Akbar distrusted him, and seldom did his love for Sheikhu get the better of his caution. It would, therefore, be not an illogical surmise that near-despair led Salim to conspire with Hakim Ali.

Loyalty in Mughal times did not sell cheap. Fear of being flayed alive, or some other such brutal punishment, was a deterrent to infidelity at high places. Salim must have paid heavily to Ali—if in fact he did hire his services—for bringing the life of Akbar to a premature end.

## Pilgrimage

Akbar's tomb at Sikandra, six miles from Agra, beckoned me. The call was irresistible. There lay buried one who gave a new turn to the course of Indian history, and presented this ancient land new criteria for assessing human behaviour.

A pilgrimage to the mausoleum was a compulsion I could not ignore. With a copy of the typescript of this book in one hand and red rose in the other, I entered the crimson sandstone gateway to the garden one bright April morning full of reverence and with an intense desire to realize fully the significance of the legend that is Akbar.

There were few tourists around. I was not in search of company. The *dramatis personae* of many a pulsating episode in the life of the great Mughal, from the day he was born in the desert fortress of Amarkot in Rajasthan to the time he breathed his last in the bedchamber of his palace at Agra, engaged my thoughts. Solitude was essential for the consummation of my pilgrimage.

A luxuriant garden—rich in water, shadows, fruit and flowers—provided a perfect setting for the elegant, well-poised, four-storey mausoleum which, from a distance, looked like a fairy castle of some ancient legend. The structure, as a whole, is an exciting blend of many colours, cultures and civilizations, and seemed to represent in full measure the ideals Akbar stood for.

The oblong pyramidal building, with its series of eye-catching arches, slender minarets and shapely domes appeared to be a masterly description in stone of the depth of mind that made



Akbar great. The marble cloister at the top is apparently the ultimate in Akbar's concept of life—an ideal state of detachment within the limitations of space and time. The novelty of the design is striking. No other monarch—Mughal or of any other race—lies entombed in India in a mausoleum of this grandeur.

As I came nearer, the mausoleum suddenly lost its otherworldliness. An ideal gave place to the awesome reality of a grave. On entering the tomb chamber, I involuntarily bowed, steadied myself with a silent prayer, adjusted the focus of the eyes to the single ray of light that entered the room from the east, and walked up deferentially to the head of the tomb. I stood there for a few moments before placing my red rose on top of the marble cenotaph.

Sixty-three years of Akbar's life flashed across my mind's eye as I made the offering. Confused somewhat, I retraced my steps. A band of tight-jeaned tourists trooped in. My trance was broken, but that did not impel me to leave. The homage I came to offer had not yet been paid. The red rose was only a token.

Pictures of solemnity, the tourists made the customary right-to-left rounds of the tomb, some bowed as they passed by, others tried to have a closer look at inscriptions on the cenotaph, a few exchanged whispers with their guides, and in the end all trooped out one by one after having a good last look at the tomb from the exit. I was alone again. This time I repaired to the western corner, and sat crosslegged to do the remaining rituals of the pilgrimage.

I began to ruminate over the events of Akbar's life. The currents of my thought flowed fast and without a plan. Gripped by an indefinable exhilaration, I did not know where to begin. Akbar was a concept not easy to divide. He could be conceived only as a whole. Some of his victories were defeats, and defeats victories. Championing of religious tolerance was perhaps his crowning glory. His conquests were truly spectacular, and his feats of personal bravery and heroism worthy of high praise. But these were all, it seemed, manifestations of a personality much larger than the sum total of its parts.

As an administrator, Akbar's genius was unquestioned. His emphasis on justice was a fine facet of his character. Large-hearted munificence was a trait he shared with his Timurid ancestors. Debates in the Ibadatkhana were an uncommon experiment in

his search for truth. The glorious error he committed in giving shape to what looked like a new religion was part of his belief that a king was the shadow of God on earth, and Chitor, Ranthambor and Asirgarh were monuments to his will to win, and also to his conviction that the end justified the means.

Akbar freely entered into matrimonial alliances with the native royal houses despite their known hostility to the alien Mughals, and thus helped consolidate an empire comprising many races and religions. His God-consciousness was reflected in his annual visits to the shrine of Khwaja Mueen-ud-Din Chishti at Ajmer, and also in his barefoot pilgrimages to the lowly dwelling of Salim Chishti at Fatehpur-Sikri. Remission of discriminatory taxes on non-Muslims was a corollary to the need for tolerance he stressed with almost fanatical zeal.

Deaths of his two sons and many friends of youth filled the end years of his long life with unspeakable agony, but he bore these shocks with fortitude. The revolt of his only remaining son Salim upset him for a while, but it did not take him long to recover his self-confidence.

Akbar's physical attributes—wheatish complexion, medium height, long arms and hands, extraordinary breadth of the chest, penetrating eyes, strength of a Samson, sharp features with a fleshy wart on the left side of the nose—conjoined well to produce an image of balance, strength and rhythm. Women adored him, more for his kind-heartedness than his power. He respected the traditions and customs of his non-Muslim spouses. Akbar had many faces. Hindus considered him a Hindu, Christians a Christian, and Parsis a Parsi. To him, God was one, the only one; the rest of the paraphernalia of every religion was meant only to serve the needs of the times.

Akbar placed high premium on loyalty to oneself. This was the basis of his insistence on truthfulness. Nothing irked him more than the sin of infidelity. Seldom did he resort to violence for its own sake. At heart he was a gentle, kindly individual. Compulsions of kingship sometimes aroused him to flaming anger and acts of ruthlessness. Not unoften was he seen in the depths of repentance at the pain caused to others. Daily he requested God for forgiveness of his sins, and also he thanked Him for the many mercies shown to him. He prayed, in utter humility and in silence, for strength to cultivate fully the virtues of love, generosity,

courage, knowledge, freedom and honesty.

Ancestors were a source of inspiration to Akbar. Abounding love for his three sons and four daughters was a deduction from his obsession with the desire to perpetuate the house of Timur. Illiteracy was no handicap to him in the understanding of the highest ethical and metaphysical concepts. His memory was prodigious. The works of Sa'adi, Hafiz and Kalidas were known to him by heart. Fine arts fascinated him. His court became a meeting ground for world-famous poets, painters, architects, musicians, dancers, calligraphists and men of learning. As a connoisseur he was unique. He could name the author of a landscape, a portrait or a miniature at one glance. Fatehpur-Sikri is now in ruins, but the concept of that city will for ever remain a memorial to the elegance of his imagination. He loved all good things of life. Wine was one of them. In youth the pleasures of the flesh for a while cast their spell on him. Age mellowed him. Towards the end, he became an abstainer, a *darvesh* with distrust for the senses.

This free-wheeling, rambling recapitulation of the many virtues and a few sins of Akbar was part of my pilgrimage. I looked at the typescript lying on the floor to the left, and wondered whether the pen had recorded correctly the ebb and rise of emotions while I narrated the events of the great Emperor's life. The answer was not for me to give. On this note of hope and doubt, I arose, walked once again up to the head of the cenotaph, bowed, and retraced my steps to the narrow exit. When turning to take leave, I saw the red rose where I had left it. Adieu, I said silently. The experience was self-rewarding.

The sun was bright in the garden. The trees looked a shade greener and the shadows a shade darker than when I came in. The mausoleum itself took on a richer hue. The place was now humming with visitors. The variety of the colours of their skins and their costumes gave the scene a significance all its own. God is truly one.

History is the greatest of all teachers.

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